

Free

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Clockwork decides his time to pass has come and informs Danny that he will be the new master of time. However, Danny needs a tutor, and Clockwork is convinced "Dan Phantom" will do...among other things.
DanDanny DannyDan Most certainly NOT Pitch/Pearl [Update 1/30/19: I'm still alive! Expect a new chapter by 1/31/19]

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Free

Literally, I only have my "Hey Arnold!" story to work on and seeing as how I did that on a whim, I'm not super worried. I also have the *Bromance is for Pussies* sequel, but I still need to plan that out. Either way, I had to write a Danny Phantom story for three reasons:

1. I hate Pitch/Pearl. What the fuck? It's the same guy. You can't say his ghost half isn't Danny. Other than TUE, there has been no indication of Danny's ghost half being anything more than the ghost side of Danny. And, in TUE, the ghost half of Danny was apparently the half that harbored all of Danny's regrets and frustrations. If anything, it's a Danny that has died but has not passed— *like a freaking ghost* . I'm being way too critical about this, honestly. I just hate seeing so much Pitch/Pearl. And, yeah, in a sense, "Evil Danny" is the same person as Danny, but he's also part Vlad, thus making "Evil Danny" his own person, which makes more sense than being the world's biggest narcissist and dating your emo self.

2. Most of the "Evil Danny" stories are either stories where he inexplicably becomes good and attracted to his younger self, stories where he comes back for revenge and Danny has to fight him, or actually good stories (of which I've successfully found three or four). There are probably more out there that are really good, but among all the clutter, who can find them? I'm trying to keep away from this and offer a logical explanation for Dan's sudden attraction to Danny, but it's hard when all the good ideas are already taken. :P

3. Some stories have genuinely great ideas, but *the fucking grammar and spelling* . I can only take reading something that has terrible grammar and spelling for so long. That's probably the downfall of most good stories. Sometimes, the author's first language isn't English (the language I prefer to read) and they try to write in English—this is perfectly acceptable and good on you for writing in a language that isn't your first. English is hard as fuck. These I forgive. Others, however, are people who apparently just don't give a fuck.

Literally, if your summary has no capital letters, I don't even bother. If you use the wrong "your" or "you're," it irks me terribly. Everyone is allowed to make mistakes and there will often be mistakes we overlook—even mistakes our betas overlook. But Jesus fuck, at least *try* .

And now that my ranting is over, let's get to this story thing.

1,096. Dan Phantom scowled. He had officially run out of room—1,096 days had passed and he was still in the fucking Fenton Thermos.

That meant he had been trapped for *three fucking years* .

After the first few days, Dan had honestly expected Clockwork to erase Dan completely from the timeline. But, time marched on as the sociopathic sadist sat in the thermos, waiting. And, eventually, Dan decided to mark the walls of his small prison to see how long before his demise.

But, seriously; *three years* ? That was fucking pushing it. He didn't even know how he had any concept of day or night in the thermos, but he had a sneaking suspicion that was Clockwork's doing.

After the first year, Dan had given up on denting the thermos. The dents made it more difficult to make his tallies. After the second year, Dan noticed his fiery mane had been growing quite a bit and began yelling for scissors. He stopped yelling after a month.

But now it marked the third anniversary of his imprisonment and Dan was *pissed* . What the fuck was he supposed to do in a fucking thermos? What the fuck could he do now? He couldn't even keep track of how much longer he was going to be in there.

"What a *grand* anniversary," the twenty eight year old muttered.

Suddenly, Dan gripped the walls as the entire thermos moved—was someone picking it up?—and squinted his eyes when light seeped in from where the top was. Someone was opening the thermos. The sadist grinned in maniacal glee.

Dan was going to be freed.

Dating Sam had been a dream come true—until about a week ago. Danny sighed, watching Sam stroll into school with her new boyfriend—freaking goth asshole. But, Danny supposed, it was for the best. Though the first year of their relationship had been great, things slowly began to deteriorate as Danny kept trying to save the world his way and his *freaking girlfriend* kept interfering. Among the fights of how Danny should handle the—relatively easy—ghosts, were fights about who they hung out with, why Danny went to that party when Sam went to this party, and who was right about certain friends they were allowed to have. By the end of their second year, they decided that sexual tension may have been what was causing so much problems and, for a while, sex worked. Their first time was awkward, but still marvelous. However, once the sex was frequent enough and stopped being a means to express their love, the fights renewed with more vigor. Eventually, as much as it tore Danny, they mutually decided to break up a week ago.

It didn't matter how mutual it was, though; Danny still felt like he had been dumped.

"Dude, don't even worry about it," Tucker assured him, "You're better off without her."

The ghost boy sighed, "I just...I wish it could at least be like before, when we were friends."

"She'll come around, dude," Tucker said. "Meantime, let's get going. We'll be late again."

With a nod, Danny followed him into Casper High, hoping that—at the very least—he and Sam wouldn't see each other often. As Danny walked toward the entrance, almost directly behind Sam and her boyfriend, it began to dawn on him that he would most certainly not see her right now; as Sam and her goth passed the threshold, a ghost portal opened right before Tucker and Danny, engulfing the two boys and sending them straight into a lair filled with the rhythmic ticks of clocks.

"Ow!" Tucker cried, having fallen over face-first. "What the hell?"

Danny, who had immediately gone ghost once the portal was in sight, floated inches above the floor. "I'm not sure...but Clockwork doesn't just call me here for no reason. Something must be up."

With a small huff, the techno geek picked himself up and dusted off his clothes. Once righted again, the boys nodded to each other and wandered around the cavernous lair, trying to find the infamous master of time.

"Where is he?" Danny whispered to himself. Grunting, the ghost turned to his left, his breath catching in his throat.

On a small, shadowed shelf stood a thermos; the thermos was obviously abused, having many dents that looked as though whatever was inside was fighting fiercely to get out. Gulping, Danny could feel waves of killing energy coming from the thermos and, with careful steps, the teenager approached the cylinder.

"What am I *doing*?" Danny muttered to himself, aware of his intentions. "This guy is *evil incarnate*. I got lucky last time I beat him."

But Danny, despite what he'd said to Sam all those years ago, was a hero at heart and was restless when peace was achieved. He was glad that the occasional ghost attack was really just a lost soul wandering around nowadays, but Danny missed the challenge and, at times, sought out his fights rather than waiting for any more

attacks. After three years, Danny wondered, how much had he improved? Would he be able to take on his older ghostly counterpart and win? Or would he fail again and finally have the challenge he'd been missing for years?

With a growl, the ghost boy slapped himself, hard. It didn't matter how *bored* Danny was. That was no excuse to put innocent lives at risk. How could he even consider letting out *that monster* ?

"Daniel."

Yelping, said boy jumped and turned around, hands emitting their signature green glow. With a sigh of relief, Danny relaxed at the sight of an old master of time, Tucker standing beside him.

"Clockwork? What's going on? Why did you call me here?"

Clockwork glanced at the dusty thermos before leading the boys to three giant portals, each showing different histories. "I have unfortunate news. I...am dying."

Shocked, both boys looked at the aged ghost.

"What?" Danny choked out. "You...you can't die! You're *Clockwork* ! You're the Master of Time! You would've known if you were dying! And, hell, you're a ghost! How can you die?"

The elderly ghost chuckled and, slowly, Danny realized that the time master's current form wasn't changing like it normally would.

"Daniel, I may be a ghost, but there is a time when every ghost must pass on to the other world. As you are old enough to understand, I decided my time was now."

" *Right* now?" Tucker asked.

Clockwork shook his head. "No, not right now. Daniel isn't ready yet."

"Ready?" Danny echoed. "Why do I need to be ready?"

Clockwork faced his portals, observing time. "I have been craving true death for many years, Daniel; but, as you know, someone must oversee that time marches on. Someone must watch the parade from above, see all the twists and turns it could take," Clockwork turned to Danny, staring at the ghost boy pointedly, "and make sure that what needs to be done for the sake of time is *done* . As much as I wanted to move on, I could not...because there was no one to take over once I'd gone."

Danny's eyes widened as it dawned on him. "You...you want *me* to become the master of *time* ? What about school? My life? My dreams?"

Clockwork chuckled. "Daniel, you and I both know that, right now, those don't exist. First of all, as master of time is a full time occupation, you wouldn't need to go to college. Second of all, as a ghost, you can go to space whenever you want. Third of all...well, Daniel, we both know you no longer dream. You only crave. And I think what we each want to cast away can help fulfill the other."

Danny sighed, nodding. It was true. Danny had essentially fulfilled his dream of becoming an astronaut and, while he wanted to go to space many more times, he could definitely go as a ghost rather than a human. Besides, the way it was looking, America had given up on trying to find new ways to get people farther and further into space.

"But...it's so lonely," Danny muttered pathetically.

"That's true," Clockwork nodded. "But I do have a companion in mind for you."

Danny looked up, "Really? Who?"

"In due time, Daniel." Clockwork dismissed, gliding over to the thermos. "But, as I said, you're not ready yet. To become master of time, you have many more skills you need to hone as well as new skills you must learn." Danny watched in silent horror—and a bit of

anticipation—as Clockwork picked up the demonic thermos and began twisting the top. "And, as I'm sure you've realized, the one to help you become the new master of time is..."

The room erupted and a monstrous roar bellowed throughout the chamber, flinging Danny and Tucker back. Clockwork, who'd had the foresight to know this would happen, cleverly stopped time before Dan exploded the thermos, then calmly floated away to a safer distance before letting time start again.

Dan began laughing as he looked around, a deep, raspy chuckle emerging from his throat. Finally— *finally* —Dan was *free* . He straightened himself, waiting for the smoke to clear. The first thing he spotted was that asshole time master—Dan's eyes narrowed as he noticed that Clockwork seemed...weaker somehow. Smoke aired away and Dan looked in the direction of moaning and coughing, his eyes widening at what he saw.

Danny Fucking Phantom .

Dan's lip curled up, revealing a glinting fang, as a growl rumbled through his chest. Dan noted that Tucker was present and Sam was missing, but his focus was drawn to the large green eyes staring at him. His growl grew louder as he realized that, within those eyes, there was no fear—only excitement. Did that little shit think he stood a chance up against Dan? Suddenly, Dan's ugly scowl became a demented smile as he advanced on the ghost boy, intent on making sure *Danny Fucking Phantom* would remember what it fucking *meant* to fear Dan.

"Time Out."

"Motherfu—" was all Dan managed to get out before he was frozen in time. Danny sighed in relief and stood up, supporting his frightened best friend. Clockwork glided over calmly, floating right by the murderous ghost.

"Dan may be frozen, but I've made it so that he can see and hear all that is happening."

— CK , Dan finished in his head, inwardly seething. However, his curiosity quelled him enough when he realized that only his body was frozen. Dan stared at the time ghost as he passed by and faced the ghost boy and the techno geek.

"What's going on?" Danny asked, eyes darting from Dan to Clockwork. Dan's anger was moderately assuaged at seeing how nervous he made the boy. "Why are you freeing *him* ?"

"He will help you. He will be your guide and teacher...and perhaps more. He will prepare you until you are ready to take over as the ghost of time," Clockwork responded, surprising Dan.

Clockwork was retiring? And he wanted that little shit to take over? *And* he wanted *Dan* to train said little shit? 'The fuck was wrong with the old man?

"But...he'll just kill me." Danny remarked, Dan agreeing.

"No, he won't." Clockwork smirked and, suddenly, a collar materialized itself around Dan's neck. Though frozen, Dan's rage made his eye twitch. A collar? Like he was a fucking dog? The fuck was it supposed to do anyway?

"Whenever Dan is acting up—as in, he threatens your life, the lives of innocents, or other ghosts—the collar will activate and automatically short out his powers. Let's give it a try. Time in."

Immediately after Dan felt the time master's power lift from him, the murdering ghost raised his fist and began to shoot an ecto-blast at Danny. However, instead of frying the boy where he stood, a sharp electrical current ran through Dan's body and, humiliatingly, forced Dan to his knees as he suddenly felt weak and—to his horror—powerless.

"What...the fuck...did you do to me?" Dan panted, glaring daggers at the smirking elder ghost.

"You know exactly what I did. I've already told you and Daniel. Now, Dan, listen well; if you ever want that, frankly, demeaning collar removed, you have to help Daniel. Once he becomes the Master of Time, you are free to go. However, as you must realize, from that point on, Daniel is free to do as he pleases with you."

Dan narrowed his eyes. It was a lose/lose situation for him no matter how he looked at it. He'd only get, perhaps, a few years of joy from kicking the little shit's ass before Danny decides to wipe him from existence. Dan frowned—it wasn't like he had much choice, though. If he refused, Clockwork would probably erase him there, on the spot. So—Dan glanced at his younger self—he would have to win his younger self's favor and convince the boy that he really had changed his ways. It wouldn't be easy, but—Dan hid a smirk—he could do it...and then he'd get his revenge on *Danny Fucking Phantom* .

"So, what do you say, Dan?" Clockwork asked.

"...As if I have much choice," the muscular ghost reluctantly muttered. He stood and sauntered over to the young crime-fighter, taking in the changes that had occurred over the last three years. Without a doubt, Danny was taller and looked stronger, but was very lean. Despite how strong the boy probably was, Dan noticed that Danny's eyes were still as large as ever...they were even sort of girlishly large. And though the boy clearly had a lean body, it was slight and reminded him of a girl who was flat. Danny had even gone so far as to let his bangs grow a little longer, covering part of his feminine face, making it more girlish.

And so Dan began guffawing. "You look like a fucking *school girl* !"

Danny, taken aback, was speechless for a second before pouting and roving his eyes over his..."mentor."

Dan hadn't changed much, other than the flames being a bit longer. Apparently, the lack of exercise had no effect on Dan, as his muscles were as rippling as ever. The ghost stood a whole head taller than Danny, who had his growth spurt and now stood at 5'8. Danny frowned, figuring that the extra height probably came from Vlad. Dan's icy red eyes were still piercing and awful, though Danny hated to admit that the red was sort of captivating...it was the same shade of red that Sam would wear. All in all, Danny had nothing to offend—if anything, he was more depressed.

Once Dan finally calmed down, Danny decided to address the sociopath. "So, your name is Dan? I thought you and I were the same."

"Fuck you," Dan replied. "We're *nothing* alike and you know it. All I am are your regrets, fears, disappointments, and anger, as well as Vlad's. Over the years, I stopped being a mesh of you two and became 'Dan.' I think it suits me."

Danny shrugged, surprised at how civil Dan was being. "I see. You do realize that once I'm the time ghost, I'm erasing you from the timeline."

"Let's make a deal," Dan frowned, suddenly serious, "If I can reform, you let me live. I'll even take over your former job and protect the world."

"Absolutely not," Danny scowled. "I don't trust you."

Dan chuckled. "Good call. I still say I should get brownie points for good behavior. Isn't it against your hero code to ignore someone who is truly trying to change?"

Danny grit his teeth—Dan was right. No matter how evil Dan was, if he *could* change, Danny wouldn't be very fair if he didn't give Dan a chance.

" *Fine* ," Danny conceded, "But you have until my training is done. Which, by the way, will take how long?"

"One year," Clockwork replied.

"Wait a minute!" Tucker finally yelled. "Danny! What the hell? You're *okay* with this? Clockwork is *dying* and he wants *you* to take over! You're only seventeen, man! You haven't lived your life! And, if that isn't bad enough, he wants *your alternate evil self* to train you and thinks that flimsy looking collar can keep him contained? *And now* , you're actually gonna give said *psychopath* a chance and let him live if he manages to fool you into thinking that he's *changed* ? Are you stupid or something?"

Danny sighed. "Tucker, I just can't get rid of him because of the past...future...whatever. He deserves a chance. If I'm going to become the master of time, I can't change things to my whim just because I don't like them. I have to give Dan a chance. After all," Danny looked pointedly at Clockwork, smirking a bit, "I have to give everyone a second chance."

Clockwork smiled and nodded at the boy. "Thank you, Daniel. I suggest you be on your way now."

Danny nodded then looked at Dan. "If you really want to start proving you can change, I suggest you start by doing what I say until it's time to train me, okay?"

Begrudgingly, Dan nodded. Clockwork waved his staff, one of the portals reflecting Casper High and, with a wave from the two teens, the trio jumped through the portal, appearing behind the school.

"Hey," Dan muttered, looking around, "Where's your girlfriend? Sam?"

Danny sighed. "We broke up."

"Oh, so you managed to finally ask her out after all? What did I miss while I was locked up?"

"Look, I need you to turn invisible and intangible and just follow me around today. I don't really want to talk about it," Danny replied testily. "Now let's go."

The ghost boy switched back to his human form and Dan noticed that Danny's signature style had drastically changed. Now, the teenager donned blue jeans that weren't as loose, a black long sleeve shirt under a red plaid, short sleeve button-up, and black oxfords on his feet. Raising a brow, the demi-demon ghost looked at his former best friend, taking in the techno-geek's fashion. Tucker had apparently let go of the stupid beret; now, the boy wore dark blue jeans, a purple shirt, and a black sweater. Dan shrugged and followed both boys in, following Danny's instructions. Discreetly, he approached his ex-best friend.

"Hey, Tucker," Dan whispered. After a small jump, Tucker moderately relaxed and acknowledged the ghost.

"What?" Dan grinned, noting the nervousness in the boy's voice.

"What happened with Danny and his stupid girlfriend?"

"Stupid ex-girlfriend," Tucker corrected. "And I doubt Danny wants me to tell his alternate future evil self about his relationships."

"I think I should know," Dan replied. "Maybe I can help him."

Tucker rolled his eyes. "Killing Sam isn't going to cheer him up."

Dan smirked. "No, but a little revenge never hurt anyone...well, at least not the person looking for revenge."

Tucker frowned and scoffed, opting to ignore the older ghost. However, the Mayor of Amityville stared at his best friend's dejected

figure as Danny led them to class. All week, Danny hadn't been himself and, to be fair, it wasn't like Dan could actually hurt anyone.

"Promise no one gets hurt and I'll tell you."

Dan chuckled quietly, nodding. "Deal."

Dan stood beside Danny quietly as the teacher in front of the class droned on, thinking over what Tucker had told him. Apparently, Danny had saved the world, Vlad had vanished (thank god), and everyone knew now that Danny Fenton and Danny Phantom were the same person. Danny was also (obnoxiously) famous and many girls kept throwing love notes through Dan to Danny. Danny, the depressed dolt, just glanced at them and brushed them off his desk. In the back of the class, Sam sat with her new boyfriend, apparently playing tonsil hockey.

"Miss Manson," the teacher finally sighed. "I understand I'm not that interesting, but if you and your...activity partner could please pay attention, that would be grand."

With a blush, Sam separated herself from her plaything and Danny jumped slumped more in his seat, clearly disturbed. Dan noticed that his young counterpart's hands were tightly clenched. Dan frowned, feeling abnormally... *possessive* of his younger self. Dan shrugged—clearly Dan was the only one who could cause Danny pain. Anyone else was unnecessary and intruding on Dan's territory. With an evil smirk, the man crouched so that his mouth was beside Danny's ear.

"Hey, Danny," he whispered. Danny's eyes shifted in Dan's direction. Dan assumed that meant he had the boy's attention. "Want to see something funny?"

Danny's eyes narrowed and a black eyebrow raised in question.

"I won't harm anyone, I promise. I just want to have a little fun with that goth bitch...and his girlfriend," Dan clarified, his voice smoother than jazz.

Danny huffed and turned his attention back to the teacher. Frowning, Dan quickly regained his smile, making himself tangible. He laid an invisible arm across Danny's shoulders, making the boy jump a bit in his seat and shift his "angry eyes" in Dan's direction.

What? the boy mouthed through visibly clenched teeth.

"C'mon, Danny-boy," Dan replied, his mouth disturbingly close to Danny's ear, "She *deserves* it. You and I both know it. After all you've been through together, don't you think she should respect you a bit more and at least do that stuff outside? It's just harmless fun...and she'll learn a lesson."

"I said no," Danny whispered back firmly and finally turned his attention back to the teacher, ending the conversation. With a pout, Dan stood straight and leaned against Danny's side. Danny glanced at the sadist, but decided not to question Dan's sudden comfort with getting so close to Danny. For all the ghost boy knew, this was Dan's weird way of trying to get Danny's trust.

The bell rang minutes later and Dan straightened himself again, waiting for the ghost boy to get his things. As Danny put away his last book, Dan noticed that a nervous-looking Sam stood behind him patiently.

"D...Danny?" she managed. Danny visibly became more rigid, but complacently turned and faced her. He bravely looked her in the eyes, but Sam's gaze averted itself.

"Yeah, Sam?"

"Look, I'm sorry about just now. Uhm... I didn't want to, because you're here and I figure this is still pretty fresh for you, but Alan can be coaxing. And, now that I think about it, he's kind of an asshole

and...well, I suppose getting with someone and trying to fill that hole you left was kind of my way of coping."

"I...I see," Danny replied, softening. "I didn't think this break up was hard on you."

Sam sighed. "Of course it is, Danny. I feel like I lost my best friend. I'm sorry...I went the wrong way about handling how I felt. Can we be friends?"

Danny smiled. "Of course, Sam. Nothing would make me happier."

Sam finally smiled back and looked him in the eyes. "Cool. Wanna sit together at lunch?"

"Like old times?"

"Yeah, the old group."

Danny grinned, hugging the girl gently. "Great. Lunch it is. I, uh...I have quite a bit to talk to you about."

With a small wave and a wide smile, Sam left the room. Danny followed her shortly, after sending a smug grin in Dan's direction. Dan huffed, rolling his eyes.

So she wasn't a bitch , he thought, big fucking whoop .

"Oh man, I can't tell you how good it feels to eat lunch today," Tucker commented as he sat across from Danny and Sam.

Sam smiled, nodding. "Same here. I miss you guys."

"Well, here's hoping we never split up again," Danny chuckled.

"Hey, Fenton!" they all heard and turned to see Dash approaching them. "Sorry we're late." Behind him came a smiling Kwan.

Danny smiled at them as the football players sat down beside Tucker. After Danny Phantom had outed himself as Danny Fenton, Dash immediately apologized for all the abuse he'd put Danny through and, Danny, knowing that Dash could be a good guy when he wasn't under peer pressure, accepted. Kwan was also forgiven, as Danny, Sam, and Tucker knew that Kwan was actually quite reluctant when it came to bullying them. Quickly, they became good friends and Dash and Kwan were inducted as members of their small group. Dan scowled at the group of teenagers, surprised at how much had changed simply because of Danny.

It was enough to make him sick.

He also hated being ignored and made it a point to stand behind Danny, both of Dan's large hands on the teenager's shoulders.

"So, we got your text, man." Dash said. "What's so important?"

"Important?" Sam frowned. "Did something happen, Danny? I noticed you disappeared into the ghost zone right before school started. How did that portal get there?"

Danny sighed, feeling the heavy weight of his confession on his shoulders...literally. "That was Clockwork. He summoned me and Tucker to his lair to tell me that he...he's dying."

Sam, Kwan, and Dash glanced at each other in surprise. "How?" they asked simultaneously.

"He says that there comes a time when all ghosts find peace within themselves and are ready to pass onto true death. He...he says that he's ready for that and has been for many years. So, he wants me to take over as the master of time."

"B-But, Danny!" Sam exclaimed. "What about school? What about your family and friends? What about becoming an astronaut?"

Danny smiled sadly. "Sam, I've been to space more times than most astronauts get to be. I can go there anytime as a ghost. Besides, you know me; I'm restless. I'm bored with being a human half the time. You remember all the fights we used to have about me disappearing into the ghost zone just to pick a fight with Skulker or Walker for the fun of it?"

Sadly, Sam nodded. "But what about us? Being the master of time is a full time job."

"Yeah, man," Kwan muttered. "We'll never see you again if you have to keep tabs on the timeline."

Danny chuckled. "We'll still see each other. I promise. But...we can't be together forever, you guys. After senior year, we have to start going our separate ways. It's time for us to grow up."

The table descended into a depressed silence as they realized that Danny was right. Whether he went to college or became the master of time...they wouldn't see him very often anyway. They all knew they were planning on going to different colleges and it was only a matter of time before their small family would have to split up.

"Wait," Tucker blinked, interrupting the silence. "If you're a half ghost when you take over Clockwork's job, aren't you going to get hungry? Need to pee? All that human stuff? How can a human live forever and watch over time?"

Danny sighed, hoping no one would mention it. After Clockwork had dismissed them, it occurred to Danny as well that there was no way a human could do Clockwork's job.

"Does...does that mean...?" Dash stuttered.

"Yes, it does," Danny replied, calmly looking at all of them. "It means I have to become a full ghost...I have to die."

Dan's eyes widened, his hands on Danny's shoulders tightened their grip, and a maniacal grin spread across the man's blue face. Danny Fenton would have to die? Somehow, that sent a shiver of pleasure through Dan as he realized, in a way, one of his greatest pleasures would be fulfilled. As Dan now existed outside of time, Dan could only be erased by Clockwork, so Dan had no need to worry about disappearing once Danny died.

...Maybe, Dan's smile widened, *Dan* was around to train Danny and then, ultimately, *kill him* .

"I mean, not get hit by a car or anything," Danny chuckled.
"Clockwork probably has some way of making me a full ghost in a humane way."

Dan growled. *Fuck* . He hadn't thought of that.

"Anyway, there's more to it than that. Remember how I told you guys about alternate future me?"

The others nodded, Tucker frowning in disapproval.

"Well, he was taken outside of the timeline and, for a while, I thought Clockwork got rid of him." Dan growled again, squeezing the smaller boy's shoulders. Danny winced and sighed. "Sorry, sorry."

As Dan's grip loosened again, Danny rolled his eyes and continued.
"Well, he wasn't. 'Dan Phantom,' as he prefers to be called, is still alive. And Clockwork has appointed him to help train me into becoming the master of time. You can show yourself now and, if possible, make it so only we can see you."

Dan grinned menacingly as he became visible again, his black, dead heart filling with joy at the frightened faces staring back at him. His aura manifested into a green vortex that spiraled around them, hiding the group of five from the other students. Outside of the vortex, Dan could hear screaming from the other students.

"Oh, my god!" Dash exclaimed. "He'll kill us! Why would Clockwork *do* something like that?"

Danny smiled. "Relax, guys. He can't hurt you and he's promised to try to turn over a new leaf."

"How can you be so trusting, Danny?" Sam scowled. " *You're* the one who told us he's tried to kill us!"

"I know," Danny nodded. "And I'm asking you all to trust me. He won't hurt you. *I won't let him* ." Danny looked over his shoulder and pointedly into Dan's red eyes. Dan grinned sadistically in return, accepting the challenge.

The group relaxed, though their eyes all kept flitting back to Dan.

"You can go invisible and intangible again," Danny commanded. "And get rid of the vortex. I was hoping you'd do something more subtle."

"I won't go intangible," Dan replied. "I like knowing that you can *feel* me." Danny shuddered. "And I never do subtle, Danny-boy."

Dan seemingly melted away and the vortex disappeared, the confused students outside of the table staring at the apparently normal group of teens at their usual spot. A murmur passed through the crowd as the students figured Danny Phantom must've momentarily lost control of his powers or something. They shrugged, knowing that the ghost boy was prone to discovering new powers, and returned to their seats. Dan scowled at them in disgust, annoyed that he was so quickly dismissed.

"So...what does this mean for us?" Sam eventually asked.

Danny sighed. "It means I've got one year to live and I want to spend that year with you guys as much as possible while I train. As master of time, I imagine it'll be pretty lonely."

"But Clockwork promised you a companion, remember?" Tucker supplied.

"Oh, yeah," Danny recalled. "He did. I wish I knew who he had in mind."

Dan scowled. Not only was he supposed to train the little shit, now he had to hear about how Danny apparently was going to be hooked up with someone while Dan could possibly be erased forever? Great. Suddenly, Dan felt strange. He looked around and noticed that everyone was standing or sitting perfectly still. Dan raised a brow as he suddenly registered that there was a weight on his chest and looked down, noting that there was a telltale gear-like pendant on a necklace around his neck.

"Clockwork," he droned. "What do you want?"

"The question is," the ever-knowledgeable ghost replied, "What do *you* want?"

"The fuck are you going on about?" Dan scowled, turning to face the elderly master of time.

"You don't want to be erased, correct?"

"Of course."

"And Daniel needs a companion in the afterlife. Unlike me, who was always alone and preferred it that way, Daniel cannot cope as a loner. He needs to have someone there, preferably someone who can satisfy all of Daniel's needs...romantic and otherwise."

Dan stared at the ghost for a while when, belatedly, it clicked. "Are you fucking *insane* ? I'm *not gay* , asshole!"

Clockwork raised a nonexistent eyebrow. "... *Really* ?"

Dan, uncharacteristically, sputtered. "Wha...? *Yes! Really!* I'm not gay, you demented ass!"

"So you don't find Daniel the *least* bit attractive?"

Dan was about to refuse when it struck him that Dan had been extremely close to Danny lately—ever since the classroom, Dan had made it a point to *touch* Danny in some way. Throughout every class, Dan had stared at Danny, obsessing over Danny's feminine features.

"Question." Dan declared.

"Shoot," Clockwork smirked, already knowing how the conversation would end.

"I'm extremely buff. Will he grow up like me?"

"He will not get past the age eighteen. He will look as he now does forever."

"Is he going to do that weird thing you do, where you switch ages constantly?"

"If he so chooses. I do it to show that I am not part of the timeline...I only watch it. Daniel, however, will probably not do as I do, unless in the face of company or the observers."

"...Why are you pushing for this?"

Clockwork smiled almost kindly. "He needs a companion. You need to survive. Doesn't it seem like it makes sense?"

"Isn't that a little unfair?" Dan raised a brow. "He's not gay, from what I recall. Forcing him into homosexuality out of need...that sounds horrible." Dan grinned. "I kind of like it."

The master of time chuckled. "I will do what is necessary for the sake of the timeline."

Dan smirked evilly. "All right. *Fine* . I'll give this gay thing a go, if only to torture the boy."

Clockwork nodded and removed the emblem from Dan, disappearing into his lair. He watched the portal that showed the lunchroom where the teenagers continued their planning for Daniel's demise.

Clockwork watched for a while, able to see Dan's obvious glee at what the sadist thought was forcing Daniel into what was basically Stockholm syndrome.

The all-knowing ghost smirked. He would let Dan believe what he wanted to, if only for the sake of the timeline.

And so time marches on...

Yeah, okay. I know the thing with Sam seems a little rushed, but I really hate the idea of bashing any characters and where I was going with it seemed dangerously close to bashing her. I never liked the Sam and Danny pairing, but it doesn't mean Sam is a bad character.

Monster

YEP. Time to get back into writing. Because I have ALL THE TIME IN THE WORLD FOR THIS.

I really don't want to do any of my papers.

Dan smirked evilly. "All right. *Fine* . I'll give this gay thing a go, if only to torture the boy."

Clockwork nodded and removed the emblem from Dan, disappearing into his lair. He watched the portal that showed the lunchroom where the teenagers continued their planning for Daniel's demise. Clockwork watched for a while, able to see Dan's obvious glee at what the sadist thought was forcing Daniel into what was basically Stockholm syndrome.

The all-knowing ghost smirked. He would let Dan believe what he wanted to, if only for the sake of the timeline.

And so time marches on...

Danny sighed as he entered the threshold of his house, his murderous older counterpart behind him. It disturbed him how intent Dan was with touching Danny, but the boy figured he had more important things to worry about. Besides, it wasn't so much the act of touching that was worrying Danny, but the fact that it was a murdering sociopath from the future that was touching him.

"Hey, sweetie!" Madeline Fenton called as she walked into the den, hugging her son. "How was school?"

"I...It was great, mom. Actually, are Jazz and dad home? I need to talk to everybody," the teen responded nervously.

With a quick frown, Maddie nodded. "Yes, everyone's here. Did something happen?"

Danny shook his head. "When we're all together, I'll tell you."

Maddie sighed, worried, but she nodded again and walked around the small house, rounding up the other members of the Fenton family. Maddie and Jack hadn't changed much, other than a few more wrinkles appearing by their eyes, but the Fenton parents were still as agile and ghost obsessed as ever. However, now that they knew about their son, they'd made more of an effort to find out why some ghosts were evil and others were good and find out if their deaths had any hand in that.

Jazz was a college sophomore, studying psychiatry and English. As the years went on, Jazz continued to support her brother in his ghostly adventures, but understood that Danny was an adult and was mature enough to handle his problems on his own; she always stressed, however, that she was there for him when Danny needed her. As it so happened, the long-haired girl decided to visit the family that week now that her college had given her a small break. Danny sighed; Clockwork must've picked this week on purpose, then.

As Danny sat patiently waiting for his family in the kitchen, Dan looked around the house, remembering snippets of his human past. With a scowl, he realized that he was reminiscing and even feeling a tad...guilty. In the future, Dan had avoided remembering his family; it was always a particularly sore spot for him and the only spot that made him remember his humanity. He was close to Sam and Tucker, but some part of him knew—deep down—that Jazz had known about Dan's (*Danny's*) secret , would've always been there for him. Some part of him knew that his mother, who was amazing and protected him (protected *Danny*) through thick and thin, would've accepted him. Some part of him knew that his father, crazy and ghost obsessed as he is, would've been proud of Dan (not you, Dan; of *Danny*) for the hard work he'd done protecting everyone as "Danny Phantom."

Finally, Maddie walked into the kitchen, Jack and Jazz trailing behind her.

"Danny, my boy!" Jack shouted happily, "What's up? Have some ghostly news you wanted to share with us?"

Jazz rolled her eyes good naturedly. "Dad, just because Danny wants to get us all together, it doesn't mean it's going to be about ghosts."

"But if it is, feel free to tell us, dear," Maddie added. Danny smiled at them as they all sat down, looking at him expectantly. He opened his mouth to speak, then felt the weight of two heavy hands on his shoulders. With a sigh and a shrug, Danny decided to let it go.

"Actually, Jazz, dad's right. This is about ghosts...specifically Clockwork." The family glanced at each other before returning their attention to Danny. As Danny and his parents now worked closely with each other, Danny had provided them with a briefing of each ghost he'd encountered, what they do, and the best way to beat them.

So far, Danny had not figured out how to beat Clockwork, though it never came up regardless.

Jazz already knew about Clockwork from the few times she'd been sucked into an adventure with Danny and met the mysterious master of time. The uni student knew that Clockwork was a trustworthy ghost who had taken a liking to Danny and was sort of a surrogate mentor to the boy. (i)

"What about Clockwork?" Jazz finally asked.

Frowning, Danny told them what he'd told his friends. As expected, the reactions were similar, though stronger.

"Danny!" Jazz exclaimed. "You're only seventeen! You can't *die* yet! You haven't lived your life!"

"Jazz is right, dear!" Maddie cried. "You're just a boy! You can't decide something like this!"

"...Is this what you want, Danny?" Jack asked quietly.

Danny, as well as Maddie and Jazz, turned surprised faces to the man. He simply stared back at them solemnly, with a wisdom many of them forgot he possessed.

"I...yes, dad. I want to become the master of time. My life has been more fulfilling than most people's and I'm ready to move onto something else. I don't feel fulfilled right now...and I don't think being a human can be fulfilling anymore."

"Danny, you can't *mean* that—!" Maddie began.

"Maddie," Jack interrupted. "Danny's almost eighteen. He's almost an adult. He knows what he wants. He's been fighting ghosts since he was fourteen. He's more mature than most kids his age and can make his own decisions. If this is what he truly wants...then we have to respect that and support him."

Maddie, shocked, shook her head slowly. "No...I...I can't lose my baby..."

Danny bit his lower lip, attempting to keep the tears at bay. He loved his family, but his mom held an especially soft spot for him. As he figured, he knew leaving his mother would be the hardest part of his decision. "You...You won't lose me, mom. I'll visit, I promise. I just...I *need* to do this, mom."

"Why!" the upset mother shouted, unabashedly crying. "Why would you ever have to *die willingly* ? Why can't you wait a few years *before* you decide if this is what you really want? You haven't even lived *half* your life, Danny!"

Jazz put a comforting hand on Maddie's shoulder. "Mom...I agree with dad." Maddie whipped around to face her daughter. "I think

Danny is old enough to realize what he wants and we have to let him live his life...even if it technically means he has to die. It's not like we'll never see him again. "

"Jasmine, your brother will be *dead* next time we see him!" Maddie replied. "How would he even *become* the master of time? Clockwork's too busy to teach him anything and Danny *still* has to go to school! I won't let him drop out!"

"I...I was just getting to that, actually," Danny said. "Clockwork appointed me with a...'mentor.'"

Dan squeezed Danny's shoulder's gently, surprising the ghost boy. Danny honestly expected Dan to be enjoying the show; however, since Dan *had* been touching Danny all day, the boy had figured out that Dan had different levels of squeezing depending on how he felt. If he squeezed especially hard, Dan was angry. If he squeezed *just* hard, Dan was pleased with whatever horrible thing was happening. If he gave a medium squeeze, Dan was bored. But...the soft squeeze? Danny hadn't felt that one yet and didn't expect to ever feel it.

Was...was Dan feeling *sad* ?

Dismissing it as ludicrous, but feeling he should do something in return, Danny patted his seemingly bare shoulder. His family looked on curiously, unaware that he was patting Dan's hand in, what Danny hoped, was a gesture of comfort. Danny received another gentle squeeze for his efforts and, satisfied, Danny steeled himself.

"I never told you about him, because I was afraid of him for a long while," Danny admitted, bringing some tidbit of joy to Dan. "But Jazz knows about him."

Jazz raised a curious eyebrow, before she gasped. Danny frowned guiltily, noticing how pale his sister got; obviously, despite how brave Jazz had tried to act when she fought Dan, she was still troubled. "You...you don't mean...?"

Danny nodded. "Jazz, please sit down. All of you should."

The family looked around, noticing that, as their emotions peaked earlier with the talk of Danny's death, they all stood up without even realizing it. Maddie sighed and relaxed, sitting down, and the other two members of the family followed suit. Jazz, Danny noted, hugged herself, but seemed to calm down.

"What I'm going to tell you may be difficult to hear, but you need to know before you meet him," Danny sighed. "Remember when I took the C.A.T's? The Career Aptitude Test?" He received nods and continued. "Well, there was a fight at the Nasty Burger and, in the course of events, I accidentally phased through Lancer's briefcase and got the answers. I seriously considered cheating. At that point, Clockwork made it seem like he was going to destroy me, because, somehow, I grew up to be the most evil ghost in the world. It figures that...because I cheated, Lancer found out and had you all meet him at the Nasty Burger, where it exploded and...and you guys, plus Tucker, Sam, and Mr. Lancer died. I...I was so devastated that I went to Vlad, hoping he could understand me. He took me in and respected my wish to not feel anything anymore by ripping my ghost half out of me. My ghost half rebelled though...I-I don't know why."

Dan scowled. *I could tell you.*

"He ripped the ghost half out of Vlad and tried to fuse with Vlad's evil half...and became overwhelmed with it. He...he killed my human half then spent ten years destroying the world. In the end, I went back in time and stopped him, putting him in the Fenton Thermos, where Clockwork has kept him outside of the time stream for the last three years. You can show yourself now."

Dan turned visible, hands still on Danny's shoulders. The family recoiled at the sight of him, but unlike before, Dan didn't find himself enjoying it as much. He looked at them all with a blank expression, surprising his younger counterpart.

"He...uh...well, admittedly, he's kind of tame right now. But, yeah. This is 'Dan Phantom,' and he'll be training me to become the master of time. He has a collar around his neck that Clockwork made and it keeps him from hurting anyone. However, he's promised that he'll try to change his ways."

Jazz did her best from hyperventilating, Dan noticed. The Fenton parents were shocked silent, staring at the demonic apparition that, unfortunately, resembled their son too much.

"You...You can't be real," Maddie finally whispered.

"I assure you, *mother*, I'm quite real," Dan replied calmly. He turned his attention to Jazz, who jumped. "And Jazz...last time we met... Well, I'm sorry about that. You always *were* a bright girl, Jazz. And, I don't recall much from my humanity, but I do recall you being there for me. So...thanks, I suppose."

Jazz stopped shaking, staring at the ghost in wonder. She could tell he had a hard time saying that to her, but she could also sense a sincerity to his words. Finally, her rational mind took over again, and she began to analyze him with everything she'd learned in her psychology classes.

Danny's parents calmed down enough to start asking the older ghost questions and Jazz took note to how Dan replied to them. Slowly, Jazz relaxed enough to walk over to the ghost and put a hand on his shoulder. Surprised, though not showing it outwardly, Dan turned to his sister.

"Can I help you?" he finally asked.

Danny looked at them curiously, mildly noting that Dan had yet to remove his hands from Danny's shoulders.

"You really are sorry, aren't you?" Jazz countered. "You *miss* us, don't you?"

Dan bared his fangs and growled, but made no other move to answer. Jazz took it as a cue to keep going.

"You regret that we died, don't you? You're *sad* we died. You...you may even feel guilty about it."

"So why did he try to kill you all again?" Danny muttered.

"Maybe because, otherwise, I wouldn't exist?" Dan replied testily. "And remember how I told you that I'm all your regret, anger, frustration, and disappointment all rolled into one neat package with all of those same feelings from Vlad? *Of fucking course*, I regret our family died. *Of fucking course*, I regret that I tried to kill them again! But my survival instincts are stronger."

Danny stared at his older counterpart, who looked back at the boy seriously. "I am a monster...and you are my Frankenstein.(ii) Don't blame *me* for what I am. If you hadn't have tried to get rid of me, then none of that would've happened. You thought your human half was the only half capable of feeling emotions?" Dan leaned down, hissing into Danny's face. " *Newsflash, asshole*. Ghosts feel too."

Danny's mouth hung open in surprise, unable to form words. Dan's red eyes flickered to Danny's lips quickly, but Dan straightened himself and looked down at the ghost boy.

"I'm sorry," Danny finally said. Dan raised his eyebrows. "You're right. I...I hurt you too, didn't I? I'm sorry about that. We...we should start over. If you're willing to turn over a new leaf, then I'm willing to give you that chance and give you the benefit of the doubt."

Dan scowled. "Don't expect me to be nice to your friends."

Danny chuckled. "I hope you're joking. Anyway, Dan...go sit in the living room and watch TV or something. I have to finish this conversation."

"I can stand here," Dan replied.

"I know," Danny nodded, "But I'd rather you sit down."

With a huff and a flip of his cape, Dan nodded and obediently moved to the living room and fell onto the couch. Figuring he may as well see how the world had changed, he grabbed the remote and turned on the TV.

In the kitchen, the other members of the family stared at the doorway for a while, amazed that the supposedly sociopathic ghost listened so easily.

"Wow, Danny," Jack said, "You've certainly got him under control."

Danny frowned. "I guess, though I like to think it's more me making requests and him abiding by them. I don't want to force him into anything. He's a person, too; I'm disappointed I didn't realize that already. He deserves to be treated with respect." Danny's eyes lowered. "Especially since it's my fault he's like that."

Maddie stared at her son, bewildered. Somehow, she never noticed how grown up her son was...until right then. "Okay, Danny."

Danny looked up curiously at his mother. "Okay, what?"

"Your father and sister are right. As much as it pains me to say this... you're an adult now. You can make your own decisions. And if you want to be a permanent ghost...I'll respect that and support you."

The boy smiled and stood, hugging his mother. She hugged him back, almost desperately, knowing that when she let go of her son, she was letting go of so much more. Jazz and Jack looked on sympathetically and joined the group hug. As they began to separate, Maddie smiled.

"Dan! Please come in here!" she called. The other members of the family looked at her curiously, then turned their attention to the ghost who reluctantly entered the kitchen.

"What?" he asked gruffly.

"None of the sass, young man," she declared. "You're going to be training Danny and you are technically partly Danny, so that means that you're part of this family."

Dan's eyes widened considerably as he stared at the kind smile of his mother. "I...what?"

"You're part of this family, Dan," Maddie repeated softly. "So come here, hun. That means you have to be part of the group hugs."

"I'm a murderous, psychotic, sociopath whose only joy can be found in the screams of others and the sounds of their sick, inhumane deaths. You do realize that, right?"

"Yes," she replied.

"But you're also a ghost," Jazz clarified. "And you have feelings, too."

Dan blinked, not expecting his own words to be used against him like that. "...Do I have to?"

Jack laughed. "Of course, Dan! Now get over here!"

And in a show of (what Dan classified as) bravery, Jack pulled the unenthusiastic ghost into the group hug with the rest of the family. With a groan, Dan decided not to fight it and slowly wrapped his arms around the closest family member. He looked down and realized his arms were around Danny's slight waist. As the family laughed and hugged each other, Dan watched his counterpart's expression of happiness and absorbed the sounds of Danny's laughter. Belatedly, Dan registered that Danny was hugging him back.

Dan refused to admit that it felt nice.

For the last hour, Danny had been in the kitchen talking to his parents about how his death would impact things and what Danny was planning to do with his last year. Meanwhile, Dan sat in the living room, hand half-heartedly holding the remote, as he watched the twenty-four hours news channel. There was a murder in the news just about every ten minutes and, each time, Dan would scoff and declare the murderer an amateur.

At some point, Jazz sat beside him and watched TV silently with him, though Dan could feel her watching him. Though it seemed that Danny was especially close to his mother recently, Dan's human memory stopped at fourteen and the few synapses of memories that he shared with Jazz before he was trapped in the thermos; thus, Dan felt much more attached to Jazz, in his own detached way. In any event, if Dan ever had to kill his family again, he would certainly kill Jazz last and in a painless way; however, the rest of his family seemed that they deserved the same reward, so Dan kept it in mind.

"Dan?" Jazz finally asked. Dan acknowledged her with a grunt. "Why did Clockwork choose you?"

Dan opened his mouth, prepared to tell her that he didn't know why and didn't particularly care, but he stopped himself. Other than Maddie (who probably was just emotionally close to the boy), Jazz was closest to Danny. Other than his friends, Danny probably talked the most to Jazz about his crushes and feelings. That, Dan decided, might be useful information. But, the ghost recalled, he could simply overshadow her and learn everything she knew. There was no reason to include her in anything.

He glanced at her and noticed her wide, ice-blue eyes. With a frown, he noticed that they were the same ice-blue as Danny's.

Fuck that kid . Dan thought, then sighed.

"Clockwork said that, and I quote, 'Daniel cannot cope as a loner. He needs to have someone there, preferably someone who can satisfy all of Daniel's needs...romantic and otherwise.'"

The girl's eyebrows furrowed. "Wait...'romantic?' So...your real purpose is...?"

"I *will* be training Danny, yes, but mostly on fighting skills and all that jazz." He stared at his sister until she rolled her eyes.

"Yes, I got it." (iii)

With a grin, he continued. "But the real reason I'm around is to be his companion. I don't know anything about being the master of time anymore than Danny does. Probably less, as I've been trapped in a thermos for three years. But the goal isn't for me to teach him to be the ghost of time. The goal is for me to make him stronger and to grow on him...so that I can be his 'romantic and otherwise' companion."

"B-But, Danny's not gay!" Jazz whispered.

Dan shrugged. "Tell that to Clockwork."

Jazz began to reply, but she noticed that the air felt cold. She looked at Dan and saw that red smoke came out of his nose, similar to Danny's ghost sense. She sat up, ready to defend herself, when she noticed that Danny hadn't come into the den or gone ghost. In fact, from what she could see, Danny and her parents seemed almost unnaturally still.

"It's Clockwork," Dan provided, helpfully pointing to the medallions around both their necks.

"Clockwork?" Jazz echoed.

"Yes," replied the ghost of time, as he appeared before them. "Me. Hello, Jazz. It's been a while."

"I...I suppose," Jazz blinked. "Why...?"

"Mostly because I needed to talk to Dan, but, seeing as how he's filled you in on our little secret, there is no point in excluding you."

"I see," she muttered.

"Well, Dan," Clockwork smirked, "You're quite complacent. Nothing like your normal self."

Dan scowled at him. "So I like my family. Big fucking surprise."

"More than that, Dan," Clockwork replied. "But I suppose we'll talk about that later."

"Clockwork? Why do you want Dan to be Danny's *companion* ? Danny isn't gay." Jazz pointed out.

Dan raised a brow, equally curious.

Clockwork smirked. "Well, then, I suppose I can tell you... *Jazz* ."

Dan blinked then scowled. "Now wait a godda—!" And suddenly Dan was yelling at thin air; Jazz was gone from the den and Danny and his parents were still in the kitchen. He looked to the stairs, where Jazz was coming from upstairs.

"What happened?" he asked hastily.

"Nothing," Jazz smiled, then walked to the kitchen.

Dan, uncharacteristically, pouted and sat back, crossing his arms. "That damn Clockwork...he must've taken off my medallion and told Jazz everything."

"Told Jazz what?" Danny asked as he entered the den and sat beside his older counterpart.

"What?" Dan countered, wondering how much Danny had heard.

"You were talking to yourself about telling Jazz everything? What do you mean by that?"

Dan uncrossed his arms and laid one across Danny's shoulders, imperceptibly pulling the boy closer. Danny, however, noticed but refused to comment on it.

"I was berating myself for opening up to Jazz so easily," Dan finally replied.

Danny chuckled. "I'd say that's a good thing."

"I'd say you're wrong," Dan frowned.

Danny smiled. "Dan?" The man in question looked at Danny, giving the boy his attention. "Thank you. I know this must be really hard for you and really against your nature...but, thank you."

Dan merely raised a brow and nodded curtly. Danny didn't need to know how good that made Dan feel.

Clockwork smirked as he held the medallion that was previously around Dan's neck. Jazz merely looked on curiously.

"Why can't Dan know?"

"He is a sadist at heart," Clockwork replied. "If he knew the real reason, he'd immediately back out. He's not ready to know why, yet."

"So...why?" Jazz asked.

The elderly ghost faced her. "You and your family; Daniel's friends; Daniel's supporters; all of you have done a good job trying to keep Daniel happy and trying to understand him. But, in the end, the only person who could ever really understand Daniel and the changes his body are going through is... was Vlad Masters. Now that Vlad is gone, the only other person who could possibly hope to understand Daniel is...well, Daniel." Clockwork looked at the frozen Dan.

"Daniel...now known as Dan...he who understands Daniel's worries, his fears, his anxieties, his pain; because Dan is the embodiment of

Daniel's most guarded and yet darkest emotions, Dan is the one who can understand Daniel the most. Dan, who is also Vlad Masters, can understand Daniel more than even Vlad Masters himself could hope to. Dan, who is no longer Vlad Masters and no longer Daniel Fenton, but is now his own person who has a deep understanding of both aforementioned individuals; only Dan could understand Daniel, because Dan is simultaneously Daniel and not Daniel."

Jazz nodded slowly, attempting to comprehend the, admittedly, complicated explanation. "So...you're saying that because Dan used to be half Danny and half Vlad, but is now his own person, he can understand Danny the most?"

"Precisely."

"But, he's still a sociopath," Jazz replied.

"A sociopath that you have seen regrets killing his family," Clockwork defended. "He is extremely misunderstood, as you've noticed yourself."

"But what can Danny offer Dan, then?"

"Dan is the one who can understand and accept Daniel—as a ghost, as a human, or as both. Dan can and will accept Daniel, because Daniel is a part of Dan that Dan can never be rid of and, in a desperation he does not know he feels, wants to be a part of again. The closer to death Daniel is, the closer Dan feels to Daniel. Meanwhile, Daniel, ghost or not, is the touch of humanity that Dan is missing and craves. Dan's constant murders and destruction of the world...that is the equivalent of a child having a tantrum; Dan felt thrown away when he was separated from his human half and, the closer he is to Daniel, the closer he feels to being complete."

"So...I'm trying to understand this," Jazz said, standing. "Danny needs Dan because Dan will understand him and accept him, even when Danny is dead?"

"Yes."

"And, Dan needs Danny because, even if Danny is a full ghost, Danny's humanity makes Dan feel whole?"

"Yes."

"But, Danny will have to be an eternal being if he's going to be the master of time. Won't Danny forget his humanity? If he's a full ghost, he can't possibly always remember what it's like to be human."

"I realized that," Clockwork smiled. "Because I know everything. And, no, Daniel will not forget his humanity. Dan is a murdering, sociopathic, psychopath whose constant want to slay something—though he won't, I assure you—will remind Daniel why humanity is so necessary. Besides, you don't think I picked Daniel on a whim, do you?"

"I don't understand," Jazz admitted.

"Daniel is a very special boy. Full ghost or not, when he is not influenced and torn apart the way Dan was, Daniel will forever retain his humanity, so long as he never rejects it."

"But doesn't becoming the master of time mean he has to reject his humanity?"

"No. When Daniel first created Dan— *that* was a rejection of his humanity; a rejection of wanting to feel like humans do. But, if Daniel chooses to die for the sake of others—because, as I'm sure you realize, being master of time means having to protect others and ensure that the timeline is safe—that is most one can embrace their humanity."

"So...Danny is..."

"A hero, yes," Clockwork finished. "He is giving himself up for the sake of others...as he craves to. Because, deep down, Daniel is a

hero and he always will be one."

"And Dan is..."

"A villain. He is cruel and malicious, but he is so because he was rejected and cast aside. Like Frankenstein's monster, all the monster wants is the acceptance of his creator and someone to spend his life with."

Jazz's eyes widened, recalling what Dan had said at the table a few hours ago.

I am a monster...and you are my Frankenstein.

"I...I see," she finally whispered. "Why are you telling me all of this, though?"

"Because you're the only one who would understand," Clockwork replied, "And, as such, the only one who can help Dan achieve what must be achieved."

"But...Danny isn't gay."

"I'll give you some time," Clockwork said instead, "Go through Daniel's room. Under his bed, in the middle shoebox, is a journal. Read it. Everything will be as it was when you leave the room and Daniel will have no idea that you were there. When you're done, take off the medallion and come downstairs. Do not reveal any of this to Dan or Daniel."

Jazz bit her lip, considering what she had been told and what she should do. She knew that, morally, she shouldn't go through Danny's things and, no matter how much sense Clockwork seemed to make, it didn't seem fair to force Dan and Daniel together.

I am a monster...and you are my Frankenstein. Don't blame me for what I am.

All the monster wants is the acceptance of his creator and someone to spend his life with.

With a sigh, Jazz nodded and began walking upstairs determinedly. If Clockwork planned this, then hopefully Clockwork planned this with Danny's happiness in mind. The redhead frowned to herself, hoping that she could trust the master of time...and Dan.

Clockwork watched the girl go, smiling to himself. He turned and looked at Dan.

"You are a monster...but every creation deserves to be happy." With that, Clockwork disappeared back to his lair, watching Jazz as she read the journal Daniel hoped no one would ever, ever find.

And so time marches on...

(i) "Uni" is short for "university" and it's how most people say it. My American friends say "college," but I prefer "uni."

(ii) From Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* . The creator was named Dr. Frankenstein and the monster (who people usually, *incorrectly* , assume is named Frankenstein) never had a name, further dehumanizing it. I could go into a whole spiel on how great that book was, but this is already 12 pages.

(iii) In case you didn't get it, Dan said "all that jazz" as a pun on Jazz's name.

Self

Okay. So, one time, I made a very sarcastic comment about how I had all the time in the world to write this. Fact is, I have this thing called a life wherein I have work to do. Not to mention, sometimes you lose the inspiration to write and you write small chunks to try and move forward. Actually writing, especially when you intend on writing well, takes time.

I hate reviews like that; reviews that are way disrespectful. To the others that review, I really appreciate it. Please don't let this small rant discourage you from asking me to update. Just be polite about it.

OKAY. I promise to be more mature about this next time, but this has been bothering me since I first read that damn review. ANYWAY. Back to this story thing.

With a sigh, Jazz nodded and began walking upstairs determinedly. If Clockwork planned this, then hopefully Clockwork planned this with Danny's happiness in mind. The redhead frowned to herself, hoping that she could trust the master of time...and Dan.

Clockwork watched the girl go, smiling to himself. He turned and looked at Dan.

"You are a monster...but every creation deserves to be happy." With that, Clockwork disappeared back to his lair, watching Jazz as she read the journal Daniel hoped no one would ever, ever find.

...

Dan blinked then scowled. "Now wait a godda—!" And suddenly Dan was yelling at thin air; Jazz was gone from the den and Danny and

his parents were still in the kitchen. He looked to the stairs, where Jazz was coming from upstairs.

"What happened?" he asked hastily.

"Nothing," Jazz smiled, then walked to the kitchen.

Dan, uncharacteristically, pouted and sat back, crossing his arms. "That damn Clockwork...he must've taken off my medallion and told Jazz everything."

"Told Jazz what?" Danny asked as he entered the den and sat beside his older counterpart.

"What?" Dan countered, wondering how much Danny had heard.

"You were talking to yourself about telling Jazz everything? What do you mean by that?"

Dan uncrossed his arms and laid one across Danny's shoulders, imperceptibly pulling the boy closer. Danny, however, noticed but refused to comment on it.

"I was berating myself for opening up to Jazz so easily," Dan finally replied.

Danny chuckled. "I'd say that's a good thing."

"I'd say you're wrong," Dan frowned.

Danny smiled. "Dan?" The man in question looked at Danny, giving the boy his attention. "Thank you. I know this must be really hard for you and really against your nature...but, thank you."

Dan merely raised a brow and nodded curtly. Danny didn't need to know how good that made Dan feel.

And so time marches on...

Danny stared at the TV, though he couldn't be bothered to really pay any attention to it. A small part of him was still concerned with how easy it was for him to accept his death. However, another part of him wondered at how Dan was actually supposed to help with training him. Danny, though young, wasn't stupid. He knew Dan knew nothing about being the master of time; he especially knew that Dan was probably less versed than Danny was. Still, Danny believed in Clockwork and believed that Dan had a purpose.

Out of the corner of his eye, Danny stared at the man he would have become. It seemed that Dan was more docile when in their family's presence. Danny was wondering if the collar was really necessary, but mentally scoffed at himself.

It's been less than a day, the ghost boy told himself. I can't start thinking Dan's already turned over completely. He's probably still plotting something.

"Dan?" Danny ventured.

"Mm?"

"Why do you keep touching me?"

Dan glanced at his counterpart and shrugged. "Primal need?"

Danny's eyes, impossibly, got larger as a red blush burned across his cheeks. "W-What?"

"Oh, don't give me that look." Dan rolled his eyes. "I just meant that, even though I am my own ghost, I'm also half of you. There is a primal longing that is embedded within the half of you that makes me; it's the half that wants to be whole again—the half that, in distress, fused with Vlad's ghost, thinking it could be whole that way. Of course, it was wrong; the only way to be whole was to be back with its human half. But, since the human rejected the ghost, where could a ghost go to be whole?"

"So...you keep touching me because something deep inside you wants to be a part of me again?"

Dan nodded.

"Is there any other reason?"

Raising a brow, the older ghost looked at his younger counterpart. What was with all the questions? Of course, Dan had only given Danny half the truth. True, some part of Dan did want to be reunited with Danny and, thus, kept touching him in a feeble attempt to feel whole. However, with Dan as he was, the only way he'd feel more complete was if Danny were a full ghost. Still, after talking with Clockwork, Dan decided his touches could have more *practical* uses. Though Dan wasn't against forcing himself on Danny, the evil ghost was sure Clockwork would get cross and immediately erase Dan. Somehow, Dan had to *make* Danny like and crave the touches, but in a discreet way that wasn't obviously abusive. So, Dan decided, fleeting touches here and there—until Danny got used to the touches—would do.

He settled on shaking his head.

"So...I mean, I don't know if it was very pleasant, but...could you tell me a little about yourself? From your timeline, I mean," Danny said after a moment.

Dan looked away. "It's probably best I don't tell you any of that."

"I-It's okay," Danny assured, "I won't judge you or anything. I know...I know part of it was my fault for hurting you like that. I think I should know."

"I..." Dan sighed, "Okay. Fine. It's probably no secret that I did a lot of murdering. I didn't know how to deal with no longer being a part of you. I didn't know how to overcome the evil that Plasmus was. I wasn't on a war path to take over the world. I just...I just wanted to belong somehow, but I knew I never could, so I destroyed

everything. It was easier for a while. But then things got too quiet and I started thinking and I couldn't handle that either."

Danny stared at Dan sadly. Had his rejection really caused so much grief?

"I started regretting killing everyone. I could remember all their faces. I really wanted to apologize, but those I hadn't killed would have never forgiven me. More than anything, I missed our family. I missed *you* , missed *us* . I missed being whole and it just made me angry all over again. Killing became a distraction, then. The more creative I got, the less I thought about y—everything."

Danny's brow furrowed. "What were you going to say?"

"...The less I thought about you. You're the only one that makes me complete, Danny." Red eyes bore into blue, and Danny swore his vision was turning purple. "Completeness...it was a fixation of mine that will never leave. I'll always be drawn to you and I'll always want you."

Danny's face flushed a violent shade of red and his breathing hitched. If he didn't know any better, Danny would have sworn this was the world's most fucked up confession ever. But Dan couldn't possibly want Danny that way—right?—so Danny was obviously finally suffering the culmination of all those concussions he should have had.

"I think telling you how I killed them is pushing it," Dan finally said.

"I...Yeah," Danny nodded, flustered.

After a short period of silence, Danny frowned at Dan. "I...Is that why the memorial to our family and friends is still there?"

Dan nodded. "I...couldn't destroy it. Never."

Danny opened his mouth; he didn't quite know what he was going to say, but he felt that he needed to comfort Dan somehow. Since the man had shown Danny more of himself, Danny had begun to feel...

Well, no. That was a lie.

Since the moment they met, Danny had felt a draw to Dan. It was probably the same ache Dan felt—the ache of incompleteness. It seemed there was a stronger compulsion for Dan, but Danny felt it too. Even though it happened in another time period, in another universe, Danny felt the other half of himself calling out for him. Since Dan had opened up to him and kept on touching him, Danny's own pull felt a little stronger. Not enough for him to really reach out and touch Dan, but enough to accept Dan's touches and embraces. As Danny decided on what to say, his cellphone went off, making the young ghost jump.

"You should get that," Dan muttered quietly. Dumbly, Danny nodded and complied.

"H-Hello? Dash? What's wrong?...Say no more; I'm on my way."

Danny stood and clenched his fists, immediately going ghost. As he hopped up into the air to fly off, he stopped midair and glanced back.

"Uh, Dan?"

The ghost regarded him silently.

"Technus is...well, he's being a bit of an asshole and I don't normally need help stopping him, but this would be a good time to train together, right? So-So you can observe me. I mean, if you want..."
Danny finished lamely.

Dan's face nearly split in half, his grin was so large.

"Let's see what you've got, Danny-boy."

Danny smirked back and shot off, Dan on his tail.

Jazz opened the door cautiously; even though Clockwork assured her that no one would be able to walk in on her, she felt nervous. She still felt as though Danny would somehow be able to tell she'd been in his room. With a sigh, Jazz fortified her will and found the journal. The red head turned it over in her hands, running her fingers over the inconspicuous, black cover. She sat down on the floor, legs crossed, and opened the journal to the first page.

The first few pages detailed some of Danny's experiences as a ghost, his growing feelings for Sam, his conflicting feelings for Paulina, his understanding and pity for Dash and Kwan, and his friendship with Tucker.

Around half way through the journal, Jazz frowned as she read about Dan. Danny had taken to describing Dan down to the atom—everything from rippling, scary muscles to a chiseled face and a roguish beard that Danny would dream about. After the pages detailing Danny's victory over Dan and Dan's imprisonment outside of time, Danny wrote about dreams where Dan killed his entire family; dreams where Dan would stand opposite Danny in the mirror; dreams where Dan would sit beside Danny, staring at the statue of Danny Phantom, Earth's savior.

Jazz's eyes widened as Dan became less of a nightmare and more of a companion. Dan would hold conversations with Danny in the younger boy's dreams; they talked about Sam, about Tucker, about sports, about politics, about poetry, and even about pottery.

What the hell did Danny know about pottery?

Finally, Danny wrote—in awful handwriting, clearly in a hurry or flustered—about the dream where Dan kissed Danny. Where, for whatever reason, it felt better than any dream where Sam kissed him. Danny, in his hurry, had apparently ripped the paper a few times with his pencil. Distressed as he was, Danny must not have noticed.

The dates became more and more recent, as far as two months back. Jazz's brow furrowed; after having a wet dream including Dan, Danny had decided that enough was enough. Danny reasoned that it would not be long before he started calling Dan's name while having sex with Sam. Constantly searching for fights with other ghosts was not enough to distract Danny anymore; pouring himself into his relationship with Sam only served to annoy them both and drive them further apart. Danny, at a wit's end, wrote of his plan to rush to Clockwork. Jazz's eyes filled with unshed tears as Danny wrote, desperately, that Clockwork was his only hope—that Clockwork had to find some sort of cure for his strange attraction.

Jazz closed the journal; that was the last page.

"So...what happened? Did Clockwork do something? If Danny was this upset about his...problem, why isn't he acting strange around Dan now?"

"Because I found a...'cure'."

Jazz jumped at the sound of the deep voice. Clockwork floated before her, his beard touching the edge of the book's binding.

"How?"

"I enlisted the help of a friend. He made Daniel forget his feelings. It was for the best. At the time, Daniel did not understand those feelings and they would do more harm than good."

The red-headed girl frowned. "I think that should have been his decision."

Clockwork smiled. "It was entirely his decision. He begged me."

"So, what happened afterwards?" Jazz looked at the journal in her hands. "Why doesn't Danny just look in here again and see what happened to him?"

"Daniel does not remember what he wrote, but he was warned that he begged for a memory to be removed and that said memory was in that journal. He knows that, should he read the journal, all those memories will come back."

"So, why not show him now?"

Clockwork frowned. "He knows it exists. It should be his decision when he opens it."

"So...what now? Why did I need to read this?"

"To reassure yourself. I am not forcing Daniel into something he does not want...he just doesn't know it, yet."

Jazz smiled weakly. She placed the journal on the bed and, with a wave of Clockwork's staff, the room was back to the way Jazz found it—messy. Jazz walked out and glanced back at Clockwork.

"Why Dan? If Danny was gay..."

"He's not."

Jazz turned around. "Sorry?"

Clockwork floated out of the room. "He's not really gay. He just...misses his other half."

"I...I don't..."

Jazz sat down on Danny's bed and Clockwork floated closer. "Daniel can still feel the draw Dan feels, but to a lesser extent. The fact is that Danny was complete with Sam...until Dan came about. The second Daniel met Dan, Daniel realized that there is a part of him that only Dan holds; it is the part of him that Daniel craves to be a part of again. Even though Daniel here is still whole, he can feel the same yearning Dan feels. He wasn't really gay. Have you ever heard of Aristophanes' theory on the soul mate?"

Jazz raised a brow, skeptical, "The one where soul mates were originally one body and sexless, but torn apart by Zeus?"

"You've almost got it right."

Danny sat back in a tree branch, invisible, watching his older self take on Technus. The demonic ghost had taken on Danny's form and was currently owning ass. The advantage of knowing the future was clearly helping, but Dan was also amazed to see how crafty his other self was at attacking.

If Technus tried to strike him with an ectobeam, Dan would use his ice powers to create a small blizzard in the form of a vortex to send the blast back at Technus. If Technus tried to bury Dan under out of date electronics, Dan would manipulate the temperature of the metal around Technus with his fire power, making the metal magnetic (Danny *knew* he should have paid more attention in science class), and forcing the computers to attack Technus. Dan never wasted more energy than he needed and he made sure his opponent defeated himself.

After taking one last mouse to the face, Technus finally fell; Dan calmly walked up to the talkative ghost and sucked him up in the thermos, smirking up at Danny. With a roll of his eyes, Danny became visible again and applauded while he floated beside his other self.

"That's how you get it done, Danny boy," Dan grinned.

Danny chuckled and nodded, "I hate to admit it, but I'm impressed. I didn't think metal could do that."

"I met an Irish astronomy professor once. Nice guy, so instead of killing him right away, I let him teach me a few things. Never did get around to murdering him..."

Danny rolled his eyes again. "How unfortunate."

"Wanna know how I was going to kill him?"

"Not really," Danny grimaced, taking the thermos and floating into the air. Dan followed, still in Danny's form, and very clearly pouting. Danny didn't know why Dan was suddenly so eager to share this particular murder method, but he supposed—in the end—it was progress.

"I mean...I guess. If it's not too gross."

Dan, still wearing Danny's face, smiled so brilliantly that Danny wondered if he'd ever looked half as good as Dan did just then.

"I was going to make him eat Lucky Charms, then send him to space so he'd explode and Lucky Charms would come out."

They flew higher into the air as a crowd of humans came by and coasted on clouds towards the Fenton house. Around the third cloud, Danny finally replied.

"What?" he deadpanned.

"Well, Dr. Declan always said he wanted to die in space. I even asked if he meant being hurtled into a star or the sun or a black hole, but he said he didn't mind so long as he was in space. I figured a little teasing on his being Irish wouldn't matter much."

It was awful. It was terrible and awful and not at all hilarious, but Danny couldn't help laughing. Of all the twisted shit he knew his other half was capable of, he wanted to see an Irishman explode into Lucky Charms? Danny's laughing had forced the two ghosts to stop mid-flight, tears running down the boy's face. Dan changed back to himself and watched Danny with a small, amused smirk.

"You're incorrigible," Danny finally said, regaining some face.

"I don't know the meaning of the word," Dan casually threw back, "Race you to the lab!"

With that, the older ghost shot off in less than a nanosecond and, with an outraged cry, Danny followed soon after. It was only after they'd arrived with Dan as the victor that Danny realized he'd begun calling Dan his "other self" in his head.

Jazz sat patiently in Danny's room, unafraid as Clockwork had frozen time still. Meanwhile, Clockwork floated across from her; he waved his hand and a wispy circle appeared above his head. At first, the circle was a cloud of black, but colors started to form and Jazz found herself looking at a strange, round creature. It had one head and two faces that faced away from each other; it was as round as a ball, and had genitalia. This particular one had two male genitalia. More round creatures appeared, some with two female genitalia or one of each or two male. The cloudy circle grew in size, showing their home, where a giant mountain stood proud in the distance. The creatures rolled around, almost grotesquely, and Jazz frowned.

"In the beginning," Clockwork said quietly, "the gods created humans like this. These two creatures that were forever together were able to work with each other to move faster. It was, of course, natural for the humans to be attached to their other half, as it was physically impossible to be separated. However..."

The circle reflected a darkening sky as the humans rolled up the mountain.

"The humans became arrogant, believing they could take on the gods. Zeus decided to punish them, but they needed the humans alive for the sacrifices they offered the gods, which fed them. In the end, Zeus decided the best way to defeat them was to weaken them. He believed if he cut them in half, he'd cut their strength and speed in half. He told the other gods and enlisted Apollo's help; with his powerful bolts, Zeus cut every human in half and Apollo fixed them, moving their skin and head to face forward and giving humans a small hole in the middle to remind them of their punishment—that hole is what we now call the belly button."

Jazz stared as the circle creatures were suddenly brutalized, cut in half by shocks of lighting, writhing in despair and agony until Apollo came upon them and changed them, making the creatures look like the humans Jazz knew.

"Confused and hurt, the humans realized they were nothing without their other half. Those that were androgynies sought out people who were of a different gender than them. Those who were once paired with those of the same gender became what humans have labeled as homosexual.

The humans ran to those who were once their partners, hugging and pressing, hoping to be joined again. Unable to do so, they began to starve themselves to death. Zeus was once again displeased, as he needed the humans to sacrifice to the gods. Apollo was once again called upon; he moved the humans' genitals to the front where the hole reminding them of their curse was. Soon, these humans found a new way to be joined."

The red-head blushed fiercely as the creatures in the circle watched in awe as their genitals were moved, then began having enthusiastic sex.

"And so, humans have been this way ever since. Constantly searching for their once-partner," Clockwork concluded, dissipating the circle above him. Once Jazz's gaze settled on him again, Clockwork continued.

"Of course, that's not how humans were really made, but the myth does hold some merit. Humans are social beings who need completeness and tend to find it in another person once they've found it in themselves. Humans have deemed it pertinent to label sexual orientation, but the truth is that sexual orientation is a social construct and doesn't matter. Humans are missing a piece of their soul and are desperately looking for it. Their soul mate is their other half. *Daniel's* soul mate is his other half. Literally."

Clockwork nodded at her and left in his portal. After some minutes of thinking, Jazz finally stood up and walked out of the room. It was then she noticed time had started again. Downstairs, she heard Dan yelling at them to wait. With a small, confused smile, she walked downstairs.

Dan blinked then scowled. "Now wait a godda—!" And suddenly Dan was yelling at thin air; Jazz was gone from the den and Danny and his parents were still in the kitchen. He looked to the stairs, where Jazz was coming from upstairs.

"What happened?" he asked hastily.

"Nothing," Jazz smiled, then walked to the kitchen.

Meanwhile, Clockwork gazed at the three portals in front of him. One showed the past; Dan yelling at Jazz to tell him what she and Clockwork had discussed. One showed the present; Danny and Dan having raced to the Fenton lab, only for Dan win and declare himself king as Danny stared at Dan in a new light. One showed the future; Danny looking at the same portals Clockwork was looking at now, watching time go by with a vigilant eye. Beside him, tall and imposing, stood Dan, nodding to himself that all was well as he gazed on with Danny.

Clockwork smiled to himself, satisfied. Trouble was coming—and soon—but it was all for the sake of the time line.

And so time marches on...

There you go. Sorry it's so short, but I wanted to get something out after all this time. I figured this was a good way to finish the chapter.

Die

I tried to get this out in two or so weeks, but I failed. I apologize. I hope this makes up for it!

Clockwork gazed at the three portals in front of him. One showed the past; Dan yelling at Jazz to tell him what she and Clockwork had discussed. One showed the present; Danny and Dan having raced to the Fenton lab, only for Dan win and declare himself king as Danny stared at Dan in a new light. One showed the future; Danny looking at the same portals Clockwork was looking at now, watching time go by with a vigilant eye. Beside him, tall and imposing, stood Dan, nodding to himself that all was well as he gazed on with Danny.

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And so time marches on...

Dan sat in the living room, glaring holes into Maddie Fenton; unperturbed, the matron of the house glared right back.

The Debacle had begun three days ago. Maddie would notice that Danny would go to school, waving and throwing a quick "Bye!" behind his shoulder; she'd watch Dan wave back disinterestedly; Jazz would shake her head and mutter something to Dan; Dan would scoff and continue to ignore her, watching the murder channel; finally, Jazz would give up and go back to studying. Danny would arrive from school, shouting his hello's to everyone. Then, after a quick snack, the boys would disappear to train for a few hours and come back.

It seemed to work for everyone at home, but it occurred to Maddie that Dan's education stopped somewhere around his teenage years

and, despite how mature he seemed to be, Dan deserved to reclaim some of his childhood.

Also, he tended to eat a lot when he was left home alone, and they really couldn't afford to do groceries every three days.

So, Maddie had suggested that Dan go to school with Danny, after confirming that Dan could change his appearance at will. Dan had immediately refused and, now, they were at an impasse in the living room.

"Young man," Maddie growled, "You will be going to school starting tomorrow. You should get an education now that you have a chance to."

"I had nothing better to do in those burnt remnants of cities other than read. Believe me, I don't need to go," Dan argued.

Maddie sighed. "This isn't up for debate, Dan. You're going to school. You need to learn how to re-socialize with other people."

"Oh, *c'mon* !"

Jazz, who stood by the staircase, silently laughed behind her hand. For a dangerous sociopath, Dan sure could whine. Just as Maddie was about to rebuke him, her phone rang. Reluctantly, Maddie looked at the caller ID and sighed. She began to walk to the kitchen, but she turned back, pointing at Dan warningly.

"When I come back, we'll be discussing the human form you're taking and buying your school clothes," she said, then walked to the kitchen.

With an exaggerated groan, Dan threw himself back onto the couch. " *Why* do adults think *school* is the answer to everything?"

"Probably because you're eating us out of house and home. School is their excuse to not have to make you lunch," Jazz replied, sitting

on the couch, beside Dan's head. "And you really should go."

"I'll hunt for food," was his reply.

"No, really," Jazz insisted, "Think of it this way; you'll get to see Danny and spend more time with him, in a public setting. You won't have to be super creepy and watch him invisibly."

Dan glared up at her. "When are you leaving again?"

"Sunday, unfortunately," she grinned, "Especially since you need so much help."

"Don't make me burn down your school."

"I could use the vacation."

"And your laptop."

Jazz frowned. "Don't you dare. My future dissertation is on that thing."

Dan raised a brow. "Aren't you, like, a sophomore? Why are you working on your dissertation in undergrad?"

The red-head shrugged. "Never hurts to be prepared."

Dan rolled his eyes and sat up; Jazz took the opportunity to scoot closer to Dan, patting his shoulder. "Really, Dan. I think mom is just worried you'll close yourself off again with no one in the house. Do this for her, or for me, or for Danny. Besides, how much fun would it be to wreak havoc at that school again?"

The ghost smirked.

And so, "The Debacle," as Danny was now calling it, culminated on Friday morning—everyone in his family conveniently forgetting to tell

him until the last minute—with a new student coming into their school for mid-year enrollment.

All eyes in the room focused on the tall, muscular teenager standing beside Mr. Lancer. His skin was a flawless alabaster—an almost pallid white. Black hair, kept tastefully short and framing his face in cascades with one long, thick bang hanging in front of one eye, contrasted his ghostly white skin (i). He wore a blood red button down with an open black vest and loosened black tie. His dark jeans touched the tops of polished black oxford shoes. Stunning emerald eyes surveyed the entire room before landing on Danny, full pink lips pulling into a smirk once Danny realized he was being watched.

The halfa in question blanched. That was probably the least low-key disguise in the entire world. He could hear the girls in the class swooning helplessly in the face of this new Adonis.

"Class," Mr. Lancer finally interrupted the whispering, "As you all have probably realized, we have a new student joining us for the remainder of senior year."

"Well, hello," Dan drawled, "My name is..."

Dan glanced at Danny who was frantically, if somewhat discreetly, shaking his head 'no'. Dan resisted rolling his eyes; as if he'd be stupid enough to pick "Dan" again.

"My name is Ezra Bacchus," Dan smiled cryptically.

Danny gave him a confused, but satisfied look.

"Nice to meet you, Mr. Bacchus," Lancer nodded, "Please tell us a bit about yourself."

Dan scoffed inwardly; human interaction was overrated. "I like to read, especially Milton and both Shelleys; I really enjoy dystopian literature."

Danny snorted. Figures.

"I work out during my free-time. I'm an exchange student from..."

Danny mouthed 'Canada.'

Dan glared. ' *Canada* ?' Dan telepathically demanded.

'You don't have an accent!' the teenager argued.

'Canadians have a freaking accent, too, idiot!' Dan rolled his eyes.

'Fine, pick Scotland or something!'

'Scotland is the ass of the world!'

Meanwhile, the rest of the class looked on curiously as the new student glared at Danny, who seemed to be glaring back.

"Uh, Mr. Bacchus?" Lancer prompted, "You were saying?"

"...I'm an exchange student from Australia. The Fenton's are being kind enough to let me stay with them."

"An exchange student?" Lancer raised a brow. "How odd. I didn't know we allowed an exchange program here."

"You normally don't," Dan conceded, "But seeing as how I'll be attending college in the States, my parents thought it would be prudent for me to get used to life here, to acclimate to the culture shock."

Lancer nodded; that was understandable. "Well, it's a pleasure to have you here. I hope you enjoy our school. There's a free seat beside Paulina. Please take your seat and we'll catch you up later."

Nodding, Dan walked towards it, shooting Danny a smirk as he passed. Danny, in reply, rolled his eyes. The ghost sat in his designated seat, valiantly ignoring Paulina's attempts at

conversation. Instead, Dan focused on Lancer's lesson; even though he hadn't agreed at first, Dan didn't want to disappoint Maddie by not trying in school. He figured that the least he could do was get good grades.

Disguised red eyes inevitably landed on Danny's back. Their training sessions had gone well, so far—Danny was an avid student and a born leader. His mind was open to new ideas and adept at adapting to new situations quickly. Like Dan, Danny was a creative fighter and always sought to gain the advantage whenever he was lacking; unlike Dan, Danny didn't have the years and years of knowledge and experience that he would need to be able to handle those idiot Observers, among other ghosts. Though Clockwork made it seem effortless, Dan knew that handling chronokinesis powers took more stamina than Danny had right now. Satisfied that Danny would know how to defend himself—and, much as Dan hated them, Danny's friends would likely help him; or, hell, even his enemies seemed to help the ghost boy, nowadays—Dan decided the best thing to focus on from now on was stamina and endurance.

Unfortunately, that would mean attacking Danny with all Dan had, until Danny was past his limit. Although it would be helpful, Dan knew without a doubt that Danny's forgotten suspicions would immediately resurface and whatever small truce had been formed between the two would be lost. None of Danny's other foes would be able to challenge the halfa, though. For a brief moment, Dan wished Vlad was still around, but the thought was quickly banished.

Vlad Masters was a desperately lonely old man who lost the love of his life and knew that he would never be happy without those simple things that, admittedly, Jack Fenton sometimes took for granted. Dan didn't care for the right and wrong of the many crimes Vlad committed, but Dan could understand Vlad's need to be accepted by, if not Maddie, at least Danny. Danny's acceptance would've meant that the years Vlad spent in the hospital and building his fortune would not have been in vain—that losing Maddie would not have been in vain. But Dan knew Danny's inherent sense of justice, though

incredibly sympathetic as Danny was, would not allow acceptance for someone who was so evil.

Dan frowned. That sort of desperation was dangerous; as he well knew, that desperation and sadness would eventually become anger and madness. Vlad's inadvertently isolating actions would lead to the deterioration of his mind, to the point that Vlad would no longer care for *anyone's* acceptance and merely seek an outlet for his rage.

Dan would know best.

But Vlad was still a coward at heart; the entire world knew now who Vlad Masters *really* was, and he dared not come back to earth. But then again, Dan sneered, Vlad was a semi-sociopathic space nomad whose sanity was likely diminishing. And Dan was not in the habit of waxing poetic about the inner workings of a being he hated.

Glancing back at an oblivious Danny, who raised his hand and answered a question correctly, Dan shook his head and hoped the bad feeling in his gut was simply a result of Jazz's pancakes.

It was a shaky hope; Jazz cooked better than Maddie.

The entire table looked warily at the new student seated beside Danny. Dan stared impassively back at them, though the urge to bare his fangs was proving harder to resist than he thought. Sam, Tucker, Dash, and Kwan—who all sat on the other side of the table—looked as though they were seconds away from bolting. Danny sighed and decided he was going to have to break the silence.

"I think we all know who he really is," he said.

"Why is he here?" Tucker asked instead.

Dan sneered, "According to Danny's mother, I need to learn to socialize again. She believes it will help in my rehabilitation."

"So, this is really happening? We're really going to trust this guy to train you, and you're gonna let him go free once he proves he can fake being nice?" Dash demanded, his fists clenched tightly.

Danny frowned. "Guys, think about it! If we just keep on assuming he can't be helped, it'll become true. Now that I think about it, if someone had just been more understanding to Plasmius, maybe he wouldn't have been so evil. D—" Danny coughed, catching himself, "Ezra can be a good guy if we give him a chance."

"Yeah, no, it's cool," Dan muttered. "Talk about me like I'm not even here. Should I go invisible to make it easier?"

"With an attitude like that?" Sam glared, "He's hardly trying to socialize and be nice. You really think he's not just waiting for the second you drop the collar?"

A collar which, Dan found, was thankfully not visible in his human form. There were too many uncomfortable questions that could arise and would probably lead him to giving answers that would ruin his chances at being "social."

"Wouldn't you be more disturbed if he was being nice to you?" Danny reasoned. "Wouldn't we all? It'd be too fake—too much, too soon. At least this way, with his nasty attitude, I know he's trying. Because I know the old Dan wouldn't have bothered with only derisive comments—he'd have killed you by now, just for existing."

Danny looked at Dan for confirmation, perversely heated icy-blue eyes begging him to prove Danny right.

And how could Dan refuse? With an inner smirk, Dan realized that Danny's vehement defense of the former sociopathic murderer was progress. Perhaps not progress in the romantic sense, but it meant Danny was starting to believe Dan at his word and that Danny had personally begun to invest more in Dan. Dan was no longer a favor asked by Clockwork, or a means towards Danny's new destiny as the master of time; Dan was now Danny's *proof*. Where Danny had

failed with Vlad, Danny had personally, *privately* , decided he would succeed with Dan. And if Dan helped Danny prove himself right, then Dan had everything to gain. His more suspicious friends would likely alienate themselves from Danny for his belief in Dan and, before they inevitably came crawling back with their apologies, Dan would be the one comforting and being a friend to Danny.

And, eventually, Dan would make himself so vital to Danny's psyche that Danny would think of no other option for Dan but to stay by Danny's side. Unlike Danny's friends, who will die; unlike Danny's family, who will die; unlike Danny's enemies, who won't even matter, Dan would *always be there* . Romantic or not, Danny would only have one person to rely on who would never, ever disappear.

And all Dan had to do to start them on this little path was say...

"If I wanted you dead, you'd be dead— *with or without this collar* . I don't have to like you. I just have to prove I won't kill you."

Danny's small smile, cautious though it was, was all the evidence Dan needed.

"The collar would stop you," Sam said with certainty.

Dan chuckled and leaned forward, "You think I can't figure out a way around this collar? You've seen me in action, Sam. Don't be so naïve."

Confused, Sam leaned back and frowned. "I-I've never really seen you fighting, actually."

"Actually," Dan's grin was wide and disturbing, "You have." His eyes became blood red again, and the other occupants of the table watched as red irises slowly slid towards the other ghost at the table.

And then it clicked. Sam's face turned ashen white. How could she have forgotten? Dan may have been his own, crazy, psychotic, *assholish* person, but part of him had Danny in him. Part of him had

that conniving sneak *Vlad* in him. If there was anyone who could be more creative than Danny in getting out of a pinch, it was Dan. In fact, if Clockwork hadn't been the one watching over the thermos, there was no longer any doubt in Sam's mind that Dan would have escaped by now.

"The only *real* deterrent in your favor is Danny," Dan scoffed. "Contrary to my so-called 'attitude,' I *do* want to reform myself."

Tucker frowned, hand patting Sam's shoulder, "Why? And why should we believe you?"

Dan shrugged. "Killing is boring, nowadays. I may as well try being nice."

"That's it?" Kwan asked incredulously. " *That's* all we have to go on? You're bored of *murdering innocent people* , so you're going to try being nice? Is this all just a game to you?"

Danny's hands slammed on the table, startling the other inhabitants; in the same instant, the ghost boy turned the table intangible, and had the entire table drop to the basement. Privacy attained, Danny glared at his friends, emerald eyes piercing.

"What is *wrong* with you guys?!" he demanded. "Tucker, you *know* why Dan is trying to change! Why don't you tell everyone?"

Abashed, Tucker looked away and muttered, "Because if he doesn't cooperate, he'll be erased from the timeline."

"Wait, what?" Sam asked, her inner activist rearing its head. "If Dan can't reform, he dies?"

Dan rolled his eyes. "If only. I don't even get that."

Danny sat down, glancing at Dan. "Actually...what does it mean when you're erased from time? Isn't it like dying?"

Dan scowled. "It's nothing like dying."

546 days, Dan sighed, scratching another mark onto his rounded wall. Rolling his eyes, Dan figured today was another silent day in the thermos, forgotten by the Master of Time and by that blasted kid who got the better of him.

"What do you intend to do with that human, Clockwork?" Dan heard. Blinking, he paid more attention to the voices—it was the first time he'd heard the Observers sound so...solemn. They usually sounded serious, sure, but also kind of pompous and whiny. This time, they just sounded resigned.

"This human would be disastrous to mankind. There is no alternate timeline that will change him; no matter how he is born, who his family is, or even where he is born, this human is a menace. His scale of terror far surpasses Hitler," Clockwork replied. "He cannot be allowed to exist."

"Hitler?" an Observer sighed. "Despite Frank's diary and the world-wide sympathy we'd hoped to garner for the Jewish, I still believe allowing Hitler to live was a mistake. For a human's destiny to be worse is unthinkable..."

"His death count is ten times more than Hitler's," Clockwork replied stoically.

Shocked silence followed.

"Is...is he worse than Danny Phantom?"

Clockwork sighed. "The difference between Dan Phantom—the one I assume you're referring to, as *Danny* Phantom is progressing happily and toward a much brighter future—is that Dan Phantom was an option. He was a possible course Danny's life could have taken, but with a bit of intervention, was prevented. Dan also has the ability to be reformed, given enough effort and time. This human, however, cannot change. No amount of love, material possessions, or time will ever change this person's heart. Dan Phantom was

undoubtedly evil and killed as many people as this human in his day—but Dan was a byproduct of his situation and his situation was neatly avoided when Danny Phantom fought him. This human, however, *cannot be redeemed*."

"What will you do, then?" an Observer asked.

"What must be done for the sake of time. I will erase him."

Silence followed again, but if Dan strained his ears hard enough, he could just barely make out the sounds of the Observers' tails wisping away.

"Hear that, did you?" Clockwork asked.

Surprised that Clockwork was finally acknowledging him, Dan coughed. "I...what happens when you erase someone from the timeline?"

Clockwork's voice, uncharacteristically, held some emotion similar to sadness. "The person will cease to exist. Their entire timeline is gone; they were never born, never loved, and will never be missed."

"That's not so bad," Dan scoffed.

"Except for the fact that everyone I banish from time is sent to a dark space, not to be confused with interstellar space. This dark...area, for lack of a better word, is where they exist, cognizant of the fact that they could have been part of the timeline, but they were rejected. Eventually, memory fails them; they *know of* taste, sight, sound, but they will never experience it again. Suicide is impossible, as is escape."

"That...sounds like hell," Dan whispered, his voice rough.

"It may as well be," Clockwork replied, voice full of authority again, "And there are times when these decisions must be made so that time can continue to march on unperturbed."

Dan swallowed thickly, unwilling to admit it—but he was officially scared shitless. The thermos was hell enough. Having to live in the dark with no chance for escape, always knowing that you could have been in the light but you were denied? He wouldn't wish that on his worst enemy.

Didn't the evil deserve death?

Either way, Dan decided, rubbing his goatee, he would not ever allow himself to be erased.

No matter what it took.

"To die would be merciful. To be erased is the Christian equivalent of banishment from Heaven," Dan explained shortly. Red eyes shifted towards the other side of the table, the teenagers there flinching under Dan's gaze.

"You want the truth? Fine. I don't want to be erased. I wouldn't even want that for Plasmius. If all I have to do is stop killing all of you and be *nice* so I can stay in the timeline, so be it."

Sam exhaled a long breath. "Dan...I'm so sorry. We shouldn't have pried. But, you can understand how we didn't want to help you with so little to trust!"

Danny frowned. "That wasn't the point, Sam! You should have trusted *me* to keep him in line!"

"We do trust you, Danny," Tucker huffed, agitated hands rubbing together, "It's *him* we don't trust."

"And even if he doesn't want to get erased, we only have his word to go on," Dash retorted, trying to be reasonable. "What if he doesn't need to reform? What if he only needs to gain your trust, get you to remove the collar, and then kill you so no one can erase him?"

"We're just worried about you, Danny," Kwan said softly. "We don't want him to betray you."

Danny gritted his teeth. "I understand that, but you guys don't know him like I do. I'm asking you to trust *me* and to help *me* help him."

The table grew silent.

Dan raised his hand to his mouth, hiding his triumphant smirk. 3...
2...1...

"I...I just don't think I'm comfortable with that," Sam frowned sadly. The others nodded their assent. "I'm worried about you, Danny. Why does this mean so much to you?"

Danny stood up, disgusted. "Why can't you trust me enough? After all I've done for all of you, I think I deserve at least your support."

Dutifully, Dan put a hand on Danny's shoulder, coaxing the boy back into his seat. "Look, Danny, I hate to say it, but they're right."

Danny whipped around to glare at Dan, betrayed green eyes blazing. " *What?* "

"You've done more than enough to gain their trust," Dan placated, "But while you've spent a good week with me, they've only seen me twice; on both occasions, I'm pretty sure I threatened to kill them."

Danny relaxed minutely as the others watched on warily.

"How about we all spend time together?" Sam suggested cautiously. "If Danny is around with us when we hang out with you, Dan, we may feel more comfortable and start seeing what Danny obviously sees in you."

Inwardly gloating, Dan looked at Danny for permission.

"...Fine," Danny replied. "But none of you are participating in my training with Dan. He and I train alone."

Sam and Tucker gasped. "But, Danny!"

"Danny, we always train together on weekends!" Tucker cried.

"Not anymore. No one is more experienced than Dan and I don't want you guys getting in the way because you think he'll hurt me. I need his expertise. I appreciate all you've done, but we've plateaued. I need to get better."

Four pairs of hurt eyes glanced between Dan and Danny; Danny glared at the table, a small icicle forming where the halfa's eyes were trained. Dan discretely raised the table back to the cafeteria, making it seem as though Danny was doing it.

Dan's lips spread apart in a feral grin. The pieces were in place. By the end of the week, before Danny's friends' stupid consciences could make themselves known and they would apologize, Dan would have Danny begging for the older ghost to never leave.

For the first time in a long while, time was on *his* side.

How many seconds had passed since he'd been there? Distantly, he thought he heard a song somewhere. 500,000 seconds, was it? No, it had to be more. Probably a good 500,005 seconds. And counting.

There was nothing to do! But that wasn't *his* fault. He didn't *want* to leave but they'd *made* him.

A gaunt Vlad Plasmius looked at the shards of reflective ice circling Saturn. He certainly didn't want to look this way. But they told him to leave! All he ever wanted was for Maddie to love him. He thought he would need money, but it was never enough. Then Vlad realized what he'd done wrong.

He'd committed a sin and confused money for *power*. *Power* kept the world spinning; *power* belonged to few and trickled down slowly to the low-lives who wanted to taste it; *power* was what Jack had,

obviously. Some odd *power* that Jack used over Maddie to keep her within his clutches. So Vlad vied for *power* , but it had backfired somehow.

And it was all Jack Fenton's fault! his mind raged. *As if having Maddie wasn't enough, he took Danny!*

Danny was a sweet, kind boy; Vlad could have been a good father, but Danny was blinded by Jack's *power* .

And then, Vlad looked into the sun and realized his true calling in life.

Jack Fenton had too much *power* ; it was up to Vlad to release poor, sweet Maddie; to save darling, intelligent Jasmine; and to free sweet, kind Danny. Once they all saw all the *power* Vlad possessed—once they all saw how much *better* Vlad was than Jack, they would all fall to their knees and beg for Vlad's forgiveness and because Vlad was merciful, he would forgive them.

They would need to be punished for being disobedient, of course, but he would forgive them after a few lashings.

And if they ever became ungrateful...if they ever sought Jack Fenton...Vlad would simply have to teach them a lesson. He would have to beat them, or cut them, or rip their intestines out.

But he would do it out of love. Otherwise, they wouldn't learn.

Smiling at his benevolence—how happy the Fenton family would be to see Vlad coming to their rescue!—Vlad shakily flew towards the blue planet he once called home. It was time to set things straight with his wayward family. How could his wife betray him with that *idiot* Jack Fenton? How could Danny look at Vlad, look at Jack, and even think he was *related* to Jack? Didn't Danny see the resemblance between the two half ghosts? Practically opposite sides of the looking glass, they were. And poor, poor Jasmine—intelligent as she is, she must've realized that Vlad was their real father, but with all

that *power* Jack had, she was probably too scared to say anything all this time.

After their punishment, Vlad would show them real *power* . He would show them real mercy. He would show them real love.

He was God, after all.

"Don't think I don't see what you're trying to do," Danny said as they walked home.

'Ezra' glanced down at him. "I have no clue what you're talking about."

"You think I can't tell when you're happy?" Danny smirked, albeit self-deprecatingly, "You planned this somehow. For some weird reason, you want us alone, and you're deliberately making it seem like my friends will leave me. I know they'll come around, so what is your endgame?"

Dan shrugged, impressed that Danny had seen through so much.

However , Dan thought, *This was also expected.*

"What gave me away?"

"Your oddly benevolent suggestion. You want to spend more time with them? Really?"

Dan chuckled. "I figured I'd get brownie points if you spend your last year with your friends more often, as opposed to always training with me."

Danny frowned. "I'll still see them, even after this year."

"Yeah," the older ghost agreed, "But for how long?"

Dan continued to walk forward as Danny stopped, stricken blue eyes sightlessly staring forward. For the first time, Danny realized that though he would die before his friends, he would ironically out-live them. A lump formed in his throat when he realized the same would happen to his family. Everyone he cared about would die and *he would know when* and be unable to stop it.

How could Danny cope with that? He was basically the grim reaper! What would he have left when all his friends and family were gone? Who was this companion slated to be with Danny for eternity? A family member? A friend? Could he condemn someone he loved to being a ghost, like him, forever, just because he was selfish? Would he have to play hero once more and be lonely for all of time?

"Oi!" someone called out to him. Danny's eyes refocused, and he looked at a glaring, human Dan. "Are you coming or not?"

"Dan," Danny whispered as he approached slowly. "If I don't erase you...what will you do?"

Dan glanced away, unwilling to allow Danny to see the absolute *joy* in Dan's false green eyes. "I don't know. I'll really have nothing to do, since my timeline is gone. I suppose I'll just hang around and bother you. I don't *do* superhero-ing."

No , Danny realized, *Dan didn't*. Dan was content to be a wandering ghost, so long as he existed.

"So...you're not looking for true peace, like Clockwork?"

Dan scoffed. "I will never find true peace."

"Do you want it, though?" Danny persisted.

Dan rolled his eyes. " *No* , Danny, I don't want it. I like living, thanks, even if it's a hollow existence."

"And, since you'll be living...kinda...does that mean you'll stay near me? What with your...'primal urges'?"

"Oh, for fuck's sake! Yes , Danny, I'm stuck with you if I stay in this timeline! I have nothing better to do but bother you and even if I *did* shift to a new leaf, I *have* to stay close to you, or I go insane. Any existence is a good existence, even if I'm stuck by you forever! Happy now?!" Dan harrumphed and stormed ahead of Danny, never letting the younger boy see the crazed grin on his face.

Even if it's an existence where you're chained to my side. Danny thought. Guiltily, Danny realized that knowing that Dan was chained to him was comforting. His friends would die; his family would die; his enemies would fade away...

But, Dan would never leave him.

And so time marches on...

Well, that escalated quickly. I hoped Vlad seems insane enough here. I'll try harder next chapter, but it's been a freaking year, so I'll just get this up now.

(i) If you're wondering, I'm thinking similar to Minato Arisato's (Persona 3) hairstyle.

Grim

So, basically, this will be the chapter that people either love or hate. I sincerely hope it is not the latter.

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But, Dan would never leave him.

And so time marches on...

"Dan, are you sure you don't want to come with us?" Maddie asked, sad eyes pleading.

Since Jazz was leaving again soon, the family had decided to go out to dinner and enjoy themselves; really, it was an attempt to spend time together, now that they knew Danny would be leaving them soon, too. Jazz, though, was content to be the excuse for the evening and didn't once mention it. As the rest of the family put on their formal clothes and got ready, Maddie realized that Dan hadn't moved from the kitchen table.

Something had been bothering Dan all day, she noticed; so much so, he hadn't even realized everyone bustling around him.

"I'd rather not," Dan replied, trying to be polite, "I...don't feel well."

"Can ghosts get sick?" Jack asked.

Danny's brows furrowed. " *He* can't. What's really going on, Dan?"

Dan rolled his eyes. "Fine. I have a bad feeling and I'd rather stay home and cover for you if anything happens."

"Cover for me?"

"Go enjoy your time with your family." Dan shrugged. "I'm not really ready for all that anyway."

Reluctantly, Maddie sighed and nodded. "If that's what you want, Dan. Promise me you'll call us if your bad feeling has some merit."

Dan saluted at her and watched the family go.

Truthfully, Dan could have gone for some free food— *Danny freaking Fenton* wouldn't let him just terrorize a restaurant into giving him free service—but the bad feeling he'd been having all day persisted and Dan knew better than to ignore his instincts. Besides, if it led to Danny thinking Dan was considerate for giving Danny a day off from being a hero, then all the better.

"Making progress?" a deep voice inquired.

Red smoke escaped Dan's nose. "Clockwork. Nice of you to drop by."

A smirk crossed Clockwork's wrinkle-lined mouth. "Why aren't you with them?"

"What do you know?" Dan asked instead, turning around to face the master of time. "I've got the worst feeling in my gut that something is going down soon. You ought to know, right?"

Clockwork shrugged indifferently. "Of course I know. I know everything."

"Don't boast," Dan chided, "Tell me."

"You'll find out soon enough."

"Why won't you tell me?"

"Despite popular belief, I don't orchestrate things so that Daniel's life is better."

Dan merely raised a brow.

Eventually, Clockwork scoffed. "Fine—maybe I do. I'll give you a clue. You weren't musing this morning for fun."

And with the usual hands of the clock spiriting Clockwork away, he was gone. Dan stared at the spot where Clockwork was, processing Clockwork's supposed clue.

"Musing this morning for fun?" he muttered to himself. "I never—"

Vlad Masters was a desperately lonely old man.

Vlad. Masters .

" *Shit* !" Dan cursed, jumping to his feet. He immediately phased through the ceiling, to the Fenton early-warning system on the roof. With practiced ease, Dan turn on the machine—long left alone since Danny was a more efficient warning system—and punched in the coordinates of the last known location of Vlad Plasmius.

The section of space that the video feed provided was empty and black. There was no sign of him. Dan closed the search-by coordinates window, choosing instead to search by risk factor. After taking a quick glance at the risk evaluation guide, Dan searched for Level Alpha threats.

The highest level.

Fangs punctured dead lips as the computer's alarm went wild, identifying a threat that surpassed Level Alpha—and it was heading toward Amityville. The only silver lining was that the threat was moving pathetically slow and was not apparently heading toward the Fenton house; the threat seemed to be moving toward Tucker's old mansion, which he lived in while he was the mayor.

"I see you've found him."

Dan turned towards Clockwork, frowning. "This is not the kind of shit I need when I'm trying to get Danny on his knees."

Clockwork gave him an unimpressed look. "Please, I think that comment of yours was entirely too polite. You can be more crass with me, if it would make you more comfortable."

Dan returned the look. "Any way you'll give me a timeline?"

"Absolutely not. However, you and Daniel should be prepared tonight."

"He's attacking *tonight* ?"

Clockwork scoffed. "I just told you I wasn't giving you a timeline. Tonight, you and Daniel will be accompanying me on a field trip. Certain...events have forced me to begin training Daniel earlier than I'd hoped."

"Vlad is fucking you over, too, isn't he?" Dan smirked.

Clockwork's expression was cryptic. "If only."

"What's more trouble than Vlad?"

"The Observers."

Dan leaned against the console, watching as the Fenton car pulled into the driveway. Were they already done with their dinner? Dan hadn't realized it had taken so much time to boot everything up again. "What's up their asses now?"

"What *isn't* ?" Clockwork sneered, a rare display of annoyance, "Now that they know of my upcoming death, they're looking for their own suitable replacement. They don't agree Daniel would be a good candidate. I agreed to let them pick someone who would be tested against Daniel, and so Daniel must be up to snuff."

"Shouldn't you have seen that coming?"

"I *did* . They'll be approaching me about this in a few weeks."

Dan frowned. "Where does that leave me if Danny fails?"

Clockwork's face was grim.

" *Great* ."

"Here you are, Dan! Clockwork?" Danny's voice filtered through the air as the ghost boy rose in through the floor. "What are you doing here?"

"Circumstances have changed, Daniel. Your training begins now," Clockwork replied. Green eyes swung to Dan, who shrugged.

"So...what are we going to...?" Danny trailed.

"We're going on a field trip!" Dan grinned falsely.

"To where? I already have the Infi-Map," Danny raised a brow, "So I know where everything is."

"It's not where that's important," Clockwork replied. "It's who we're meeting." Clockwork waved his staff and a portal appeared. Unlike the usual green swirls of the ghost zone, the aura the portal emitted was darker...more sinister.

"Are you sure *where* isn't important?" Dan asked, looking at the portal skeptically.

"Of course. After all, we're merely guests," Clockwork chuckled, shoving the two reluctant ghosts in. The Fenton ghosts screamed as they fell, the portal mysteriously long—most of Clockwork's portals were instantaneous and never went *down* .

"Are we going to hell?!" Dan shouted, trying desperately to get his bearings.

The boys landed in a heap abruptly on a hard, heated ground. Danny groaned, but got up easily, having fallen on Dan. Casting a sympathetic eye towards the older ghost, Danny was satisfied to find nothing immediately wrong and offered his hand. With an annoyed grunt, Dan grabbed the hand and ended up pulling Danny right back on top of him.

"You know," Dan's amused voice filled the cavern a moment later, "When you offer to help me up, usually you do so knowing you can *actually help me up* ."

"Oh, shut up," Danny moaned, burning face hidden against Dan's broad chest.

Another amused snort escaped Dan, then he was on his feet, helping Danny right himself. Finally, they glanced around.

"Holy shit," they whispered simultaneously.

Emerald flames licked the walls, a river of lava and fire coursed through the wide cavern, and pained screams echoed all around them. An opulent castle, black and menacing, stood erect in the distance. Finally, Clockwork floated beside them, admiring the view.

"Lovely, isn't it?" he remarked.

"What the fuck is this?" Dan demanded.

"You said it yourself, Dan," Clockwork smirked. "Welcome to hell."

Being able to fly had its advantages; they reached the castle in no time, and were welcomed by skeletal guards. The castle was magnificent inside as well, though the décor was definitely murder-tastic. Blood oozed down the walls; tortured souls could be heard behind heavily bolted doors; and the throne room was large, but Spartan. The room only contained two thrones—the one on the left was a winged, black seat with blood red cushions, a scythe resting against it innocently. The right one was slightly smaller, with—of all things—pink cushions; the *Necronomicon* lay innocently on the seat of the throne.

"We're in fucking hell," Dan said, the seventh time he'd repeated it.

"Ohmigawdohmigawdohmigawd..." Danny mumbled, his mantra becoming more and more indistinguishable. Clockwork floated beside them, serene.

" *Clockwork* , *is dat you ?*" a heavily accented voice—Jamaican?—asked from seemingly everywhere.

"Grim, I had to come see you," Clockwork replied, a smile on his face.

" *Grim?*" the other ghosts mouthed, looking at each other.

Suddenly, a swirl of black appeared before them; black tendrils separated and floated down, becoming a flowing fabric, the edges of which touched bony—literally bony—toes. Red and green eyes trailed up the tall, broad-shouldered figure.

And stopped short at the smiling skull on top of those shoulders.

" *Holy shit*, " Danny squeaked.

" *The Grim Reaper* ," Dan breathed, eyes wide.

"Grim is just fine," the skull replied, and the ghosts could see a green tongue wagging between white teeth.

"Daniel," Clockwork interjected as their faces became more horrified, "This is the Grim Reaper, as you've ascertained. While I have the power to erase people from the timeline, when it is time for someone to die, that is Grim's jurisdiction. Grim, this is Daniel Fenton, the one who I hope will succeed me as the Master of Time. This is Dan Phantom, his alternate future self who is trying to reform."

"A pleasure," Grim nodded at them. Danny, mouth agape, nodded back. Dan, however, regained control of his nervous system.

"Uh, nice to meet you. I guess you and I should be pretty well acquainted, huh?" Dan tried for a smile, but it looked like more of a grimace.

Grim laughed, the sound the very definition of evil; Danny doubted Dan ever sounded like that.

"Yes, I suppose you and I have done some work together in de past, albeit wit'out your knowledge."

"Not to be rude, but why are we here?" Danny finally managed.

"As I said, circumstances have forced me to begin training you right away. Combat and such...that's Dan's job. But you must know the ins and outs of being the Master of Time and, though it may seem that I do the job alone, the opposite is true. I am *only* the Master of Time, after all."

"So, Danny," Grim sat back, lounging on his throne, "When de time comes for a human—or what have you—to die, Clockwork and I work together to decide when de human shall die."

Danny blanched. "That means...I have to choose when they'll die...?" *I'll have to choose when my family dies?*

Grim laughed again. "No, no, Danny. *I* choose when and how dey die. Clockwork merely cooperates wit me, man."

Dan raised a brow. "So, how does this collaboration work?"

"As I'm sure you know, dere is more den one possible way a person's life can go," Grim looked pointedly from Dan to Danny, "And so, dere are many different ways dey can live or die. I decide when de time has come for a creature to die; Clockwork tells me de many paths a person's life can take; I decide de deaths for each of de paths; then, finally, de creature chooses dey path and, in some ways, dey death."

"Does...Does Clockwork know how you plan to have them die?" Danny asked.

"Never, man," the reaper scoffed, "Death is not his jurisdiction."

"Nor is it my place to judge," Clockwork supplied.

"So, how come some people who are awful die peaceful deaths and people who are good die awful deaths?" Dan questioned.

Grim shrugged. "Why would you change your ways when life has given you all it has to offer? Why bother being a better person when being a monster is easier? Dey walk willingly into dey comfortable little jail rooms and I leave de door wide open for dem. Dey live dey lives in that jail cell, dey see no reason to leave."

Grim looked at his guests, empty eyes engulfing their souls, voice heavy with implications.

"Den I *shut* de door."

Danny shivered, unconsciously ambling closer to Dan. Dan pressed a hand to Danny's shoulder, anchoring the younger ghost. Grim was still staring at them, as if he was planning *their* deaths...

"You know how Danny dies," Dan muttered, eyes wide with realization. "You've already planned it out."

Grim's toothy grin spread across his pallid face. "I planned it *years* ago, man. I take pride in me job."

Danny blanched. "I think...I think I need to get home."

"Unfortunately, Danny, you'll be staying." Clockwork smiled unsympathetically, "We'll be having dinner with the Grim family. You have an aversion to death that must be overcome if you're to actually accept being the Master of Time. As such, I hope spending time with Grim and his lovely wife will help you see that Death is not evil."

Dan and Danny frowned, doubt prevalent in their expressions.

"No, children," Grim said, standing. "Death is not evil. Death is release; death is repentance; death is *justice*. I enjoy me job, but I'm not inherently evil."

The Grim Reaper chuckled.

"If you want evil, *dat* would be me wife."

Danny glanced around awkwardly as he sat in his seat at the long, ornate table; his gaze shifted to Dan—the older ghost had apparently already gotten used to their grotesque settings and was examining the China on the table. Clockwork sat on the other side of the table, an empty chair to his right. Danny assumed that was the chair for Grim's wife. Danny was still nervous, especially since the Grim Reaper seemed to imply his wife was scarier than him. Just as he considered making another excuse to return home, the doors to the dining room banged open, a figure silhouetted in the green light.

Danny swallowed.

As the woman—judging by the voluptuous figure—approached, Dan and Danny's jaws dropped. The longhaired blonde was dressed in a tight, all black dress that reached her thighs with black heels. There was a single black headband in her hair, though what it was holding back was a mystery; her bangs were free, framing her heart-shaped face. Despite her seductive figure, there was something empty and awful in her red eyes; the thick, black eyebrows she had seemed to be permanently furrowed, making her eyes look even more sharp and frightening. She walked with an easy grace, but even Dan could admit that her entire being radiated authority—this was not a woman to mess with.

Grim stood from his chair at the head of the table, and pulled out a chair for her; she fell into it majestically, steepled her fingers, and rested her chin delicately on her hands. Her gaze, even more jarring and piercing when focused, locked onto Dan and Danny.

"Guests, I presume?" she asked, her voice low and melodic.

Grim smiled. "Meet Danny Fenton and his alternate future other half, Dan Phantom. Clockwork hopes *dat de boy* will be *de new Master* of

Time. He is here to get over his fear of death."

Grim glanced at the frozen ghosts. "How rude of me. Allow me to introduce me wife—Mandy."

"Pleased to meet you," she said, her voice dead.

"T-The pleasure is ours, ma'am," Danny replied shakily. Dan nodded.

The meal was served quickly after that, throngs of servants hurriedly running in and out to serve the King and Queen of Death. Though skeptical at first, Danny found he liked the food, and was able to relax enough to eat a few bites. However, the table was entirely silent. Other than the sounds of eating, no one dared to speak. Not even Dan found the nerve to make an off-color joke.

Not when Mandy's piercing gaze could fall on them.

"Am I making you two nervous?" she finally asked, making both ghosts jump a little in their seats.

"Ah, uhm, no!" Danny stuttered. "I'm just...I feel weird. This isn't what I imagined death to be..."

Dan smiled, managing—just—to not make it shaky. "I'm here for moral support."

"And doing a terrible job, I see," Mandy stated bluntly. "But that's understandable. I'm surprised you boys haven't run out screaming yet. Only the extremely brave and the extremely stupid are usually able to stay."

Grim smirked. "Take that as a compliment boys; she didn't imply you two were the latter, after all."

"A-Are you evil, Mrs. Grim?" Danny managed to ask after a beat of silence.

Mandy's porcelain face never twitched from the perpetually permanent frown she wore.

"I appreciate your manners, but I prefer 'Mandy.'"

Danny gulped and nodded.

"To answer your question, Danny—yes. I am evil."

"Why?"

Mandy sat back and crossed her legs. "Because I simply am. I was born that way, frankly. And, since Clockwork obviously never erased my existence, I was meant to be that way. It brings me joy to see others suffer. So, I tempt them; suggestions here, whispers there. I tell people what they need to hear so they'll be evil like me."

"No one does it better den me wife, mind you," Grim smirked.

"I thought you said death wasn't evil?" Dan frowned.

"I am not," Grim replied.

"Death is not evil. Death is release; death is repentance; death is *justice*," Mandy interjected, echoing her husband. "But people have free will, Danny. They choose the way they die; they choose whether or not they die as noble people. They choose to follow my whispers—I can never force anyone to be evil. It's not as much fun that way."

"Why are you two married then?" Danny glanced between the King and Queen of Death.

"Why? What do ye tink fuels most of me deaths, man?" Grim chuckled. " *Evil* people, *evil* intentions." Grim's hollow gaze landed on Dan. "Isn't that right, man?"

Dan smirked and shrugged when Danny gave him a disapproving glare.

"We're married because we have similar interests," Mandy said. "I enjoy being evil and bringing people to their gruesome end. Grim enjoys enforcing his powers and ending the lives of mortals. More evil people; more people dead."

"D-Don't you love each other?" Danny whispered.

Mandy and Grim glanced at each other; then, Grim broke into raucous laughter, clutching his stomach. Mandy's expression didn't change, but there seemed to be a slightly lighter aura around the frightening woman—as if she were amused.

"We are *evil* and *death*, Danny," Mandy stared at the young halfa. "We don't know anything about love; that's why we're in hell. That's why we're most equipped to rule over hell. We don't have sympathy for other creatures or feel affection for each other."

"What we feel is intense hatred for each other, man," Grim clarified. "We see the usefulness in each other, and we are a united front to the other Realms of Darkness. We only respect power, child."

"And seeing as how Grim and I have power in spades, the best thing to do was get married and bring out the worst in each other. Besides, why get rid of someone as useful as the Grim Reaper when I can just own him?"

Danny looked at them, back and forth, slowly growing horrified at the implications. "Are...I mean...is this what I'll be as Master of Time? I won't have any meaningful relationships anymore?"

Frowning, Dan quickly placed a hand on Danny's shoulder. The frightened and anxious halfa glanced up at Dan, desperate eyes wide and pleading. With an internal groan—his first meeting with death and evil and Dan was going to fuck up his evil image thanks to *Danny Freaking Fenton*—Dan slowly wrapped Danny in a cautious, awkward hug. Refusing to say anything, Dan hoped the gesture would be enough to calm Danny down.

And, much to Danny's growing frustration, it did. Danny's guilt had never quite abided since their talk; knowing that Dan was chained to Danny for eternity meant that Danny would never be alone. And, despite their vast differences, Danny could see a little of himself in Dan. Beyond the sociopath; beyond the sadist; beyond all the crazy, Danny could see hints of a good person in Dan. The goodness was warped and torn and nearly beyond repair, but Dan had a spark in him that Danny could grow attached to.

Especially if Danny was the only one privy to Dan's momentary shows of affection and kindness.

Deciding he felt better, Danny briefly returned the hug and pulled away, smiling up at a grumbling Dan. "Thank you. I feel better."

"Thanks for making me look like I care about you in front of my idols, asshole," was Dan's reply.

Danny laughed. "I'll make it up to you."

Clockwork saw fit to interrupt, then. "Daniel. Dan. Touching though all that may be—" Dan huffed, "—we are here for more than dinner."

Dan sighed. "Much as I hate to say it, the old man over there is right. Danny, I know this is scary; I know death and evil go way against your hero code. But just like you, they chose to do the thing that makes them most happy. Mandy enjoys being the Ice Queen and Grim enjoys offing people; you can't judge them, because I know you don't understand them. And they're not asking you to understand; they're asking you to accept them and let them do their job so that the world can keep spinning. At the core of it, they're just like you and me."

Danny's brows furrowed. "One: you're a murdering, sociopathic sadist. I think they're more like *you* . Two: how are they *anything* like me?"

"Mom! Dad!" a voice called.

Surprised, both ghosts turned towards the sound. At the entrance of the dining room stood two small figures. One was a boy, apparently. He had a round, white head with a tuft of brown hair on top; the majority of his head was covered by the black hoodie he wore. Matching black pants and running shoes covered the rest of his body. The boy was painfully normal—except for the fact that his head was a skull and, it seemed, that skull had one human-looking eye in the left socket. Clutching the arm of the boy was a girl who looked about the same age. Her blonde hair stuck up oddly at the sides and the purple dress she wore was disturbingly short; especially considering that the sleeves covering her dainty hands were almost longer than the dress. The visible skin the girl showed looked as though it was sown together carefully, like a doll's. On her feet were cute, black Mary Jane shoes. Like the boy, only her right eye socket actually contained an eye; her other socket was eerily empty.

"It is a pleasure to make of our guests, the acquaintance of those with such high worth," the girl said, curtsying.

The boy rolled his one eye. "What she said. Mom, Dad, can you tell Minnie to stop sneaking into my bed at night?"

Mandy huffed. "Minnie, you know better. You two were supposed to be in bed. I already told you we were having guests tonight and were not to be disturbed."

" *Minnie* is the only one disturbing people!" the boy said in defense.

The girl in question blushed and looked away. "My only intent, in fair Luna's light, 'twas to spend this eve in my most loved's arms."

"W-Why does everything you say sound perverted!?"

"I suppose further introductions are in order, den," Grim shrugged. He turned to the two catatonic ghosts. "Danny Fenton, Dan Phantom, meet me children—Grim Jr. and MiniMandy. We call them Junior and Minnie for short."

"Danny Fenton?" Junior smiled. "You mean *the* Danny Phantom ? The superhero?" Junior seemed to look at Danny properly now, grinning gleefully. "Wow, I've heard so much about you! You're the coolest!"

"Indeed, tales of your heroics are told, and have been regaled in the Castle Grim," Minnie nodded, smiling at the ghosts. "We've also heard of your evil other, the dread villain known by all: Dan Phantom. Pleased was mother, when to her charms Dan fell."

If she could have, Mandy would have smirked. Dan coughed, choosing to look anywhere but at the matriarch of the castle. Danny gave him a quick glance, looking between Dan and Mandy; eventually, the halfa frowned at the insinuations and turned back to the kids.

" *Your* children?" Danny asked. "Why do they...?"

"Look so different?" Mandy interjected. "Circumstances, I'm afraid, which are much too heavy a topic to get into now. Essentially, Minnie used to look much like me, but she had a near death experience in Halloween Town and needed a new body."

"Since den, de children have been close," Grim said with a disinterested air.

Dan watched as Minnie further snuggled herself onto her brother; Junior groaned, but didn't stop her. "How close exactly *are* they?"

Mandy snorted. "Exceedingly."

Dan snorted and Danny blushed, both looking at the possessive grip Minnie had on Junior's arm with new understanding.

Junior ran up to Danny, dragging a willing Minnie along. Even with one eye empty, Danny could see the clear admiration shining in Junior's gaze. With a small smile of his own, Danny felt a little more comfortable.

"I think it's super cool that you can go between the ghost zone and the human realm!" the skeleton boy grinned. "How did you get your powers? How did you stop Dan Phantom? How is Dan Phantom here with you now?"

"Uh, well, I don't mind telling you if your parents aren't mad at you for being out of bed," Danny replied.

"Oh, please, most beloved parents of ours! Fie on the sands of time that drain away; pray, pause those grains, that we may hear their tales!"

Grim chuckled. "Of course, princess. You and your brother may spend time with our guests, if your mother has no objections."

"Mom, *please* !" Junior begged with a large smile. "We never get any guests that aren't scared of you! I promise I'll pay more attention to Ms. Helga for a *week* !"

"For a *year* ," Mandy bargained. "And you'll be putting more effort in your combat lessons and your Nergal practice with Minnie. Understand?"

"Yes, mom!" Junior cheered. "This is so cool! C'mon, you have to see my room! Minnie, grab Dan!"

With that, Junior's bony fingers latched onto Danny's wrist and pulled, forcing Danny to run just to keep up with the hyperactive child. More relaxed, Minnie held out a hand for Dan to take; with a sigh, Dan accepted, allowed her to lead him to her brother's room. Clockwork, Grim, and Mandy remained in the dining room, watching them go. When at last Junior's loud voice quieted and Dan's heavy steps echoed away, the remaining members of the family Grim turned towards Clockwork as one.

"This was quite last minute, Clockwork," Mandy said, displeasure evident in her tone. "Pray tell, why did you suddenly ask us to reschedule this little soirée we planned for six *months* from now?"

"The Observers will be interfering in a few weeks time. I apologize, Mandy, but my own schedule has been similarly screwed over. With Vlad's return, the Observers will be paying more attention to my own fate and will decide they don't want Daniel to be the Master of Time. I know who they plan on asking and I can't have that happen."

Grim raised an invisible brow. "Who do dey plan on asking, man?"

Clockwork scowled. "Walker."

Mandy's eyes widened. "Walker? Did you say *Walker* ?"

"Dat crazy ghost who tinks he's a Texas Ranger and imprisons every ghost he can?" Grim demanded.

"Yes, *Walker* . They like how...by-the-book he is. The Observers, for all their watching, are extremely blind."

Mandy scowled. "We can't allow that psychopath to take over. He'll try to shut us down."

"He won't settle for dey deaths," Grim frowned. "He'll just erase everyone who gets in his way."

"Precisely," Clockwork sighed. "There's no way we can allow that. Do I have your full support, then, in training Danny?"

"What are you needin', man?" the reaper asked.

"Danny needs stamina training, but I know Dan is reluctant to do so. Whatever new found relationship they have, Dan knows it will be compromised if he attacks Danny with everything he's got. That's where you two come in."

Grim chuckled. "I see. So, you want us to push him beyond his limits?"

"In that case, we'll start with the children," Mandy said, and even her mouth quirked up into a smirk. "They should be more than enough

for Danny, as he is now."

"And that's why Dan is with me now," Danny smiled, finishing his story.

The small group sat on Junior's king-sized bed, at the boy's insistence. Once Junior realized that his skeletal features were disturbing Danny, Junior used his strange powers to make himself look more human. Danny, feeling bad that the boy was so considerate, assured Junior that Danny preferred the skeleton to the flesh, and Junior excitedly returned to normal.

If anything, Danny realized there were many more powers out there that he was unaware of.

Once they all sat on the enormous bed—Minnie making a point to sit on her brother's lap, forcing Junior to rest his chin on her shoulder—Junior and Minnie listened rapturously to Danny's tale. And, emboldened by their attention, Danny told them everything: the first time he got his powers; his adventures with Sam and Tucker; the many ghosts he battled; his problems with high school; his battle with Dan (and Dan, of course, interjected a few times during this story); his boredom since he'd saved the world from Vlad; Clockwork's proposal; and Dan's return. Thrilled though they seemed, not once did the children interrupt.

"That is so awesome!" Junior cried. "What's the human realm like?"

Danny smiled sympathetically. Years of developed paranoia forced Danny to train himself to notice little details. Junior's room was full of skateboards, baseballs, and other human objects. It was clear that Junior's fascination with the living realm was more than a passing trend.

"You really wanna go there, don't you, Junior?" Danny asked.

Junior sighed, looking away. "I didn't ask to be the Prince of Death. I just wanna do stuff that normal kids do. My dad got to go to the human realm. He got to stay there for a while when my mom was a kid."

"He knew your mom when she was a kid?" Dan grimaced.

"Mother was once a young, spritely maiden. Even at mine age, she was Beelzebub. A terror was she to all those she met. She fooled the dread Grim into slavery. She ruled her town with fists cast in iron. Though beloved mother's thread was severed, he found himself unwilling to claim her. Their hatred began with their first meeting. That hatred has sustained them for so long, my father realized they must be one."

Danny raised a brow. "Uh...?"

"She's saying that my mom tricked my dad into being her slave when she was, like, eight. They hated each other right away, but my dad respected my mom. Even that young, my mom was a basically evil incarnate. My dad decided not to claim her soul, though her sands of life were definitely out. Instead, my mom became immortal. So, my mom took over her town and was about to take over the world, but dad proposed to her. He told her that her only choices were to marry him or to die. Mom decided to marry him, and they've been together ever since. I know they say they don't love each other, but they really respect and watch out for each other," Junior smiled softly. "And they really watch out for us."

"Even the most blackened soul knows of love," Minnie beamed, cuddling her brother. "Deny they may; Venus made two souls whole."

Danny blushed, smiling at the cuddling children, understanding washing over him. Though their parents seemed cold and unfeeling, Junior and Minnie seemed convinced that Grim and Mandy loved each other and their children.

"Maybe they're not as bad as they think they are," Danny shrugged.

"They probably are," Dan replied, laughing. "But it works for them."

Danny frowned at Dan. "So...you're acquainted with Mandy?"

"In a sense, I suppose," Dan muttered. "I don't know her personally, but apparently, she's the one who suggested I go on a murdering spree."

"Oh," Danny blinked. " *Oh* !"

"Oh?" Dan raised a brow.

"N-Nothing!" Danny pouted, drawing his knees to his chest. "I just misunderstood..."

"Misunderstood what?" Dan scowled. "Care to share with the class?"

Junior giggled. "He thought my mom knew you in the biblical sense."

Danny flushed violently, head whipping around to stare at Junior. " *What the hell* ! I thought you were *ten* ! How do you know *anything* about that?!"

Junior had the audacity to look at Danny like *Danny* was the idiot. "I'm the child of Evil and Death. When we don't have guests, my mom runs around half naked. My sister has a very obvious, incestuous crush on me and sneaks into my bed on a regular basis. I live in Hell and go to the nine circles when I have time for a vacation. You think I haven't been to the second circle by now?"

Danny looked at Dan pleadingly. Much to his chagrin, Dan only stared back.

"You thought I slept with their mom?" he finally asked, to Danny's growing embarrassment.

"The way 'twas worded worried poor Phantom; he loves you best and feared you unfaithful. Fear not, dear champion—though your

love's not pure, 'twas you your lover craved most in this world," Minnie smiled encouragingly.

Unfortunately, it only served to kick Danny's dead heart into overdrive. " *What?! M-My love ? My L-L-LOVER ?!* What are you two even saying!?" he cried, voice high-pitched.

Shit, shit, shit, shit . Dan thought. Danny was nowhere near accepting that they could be together in more than a friendly sense just yet.

"S-She's basically talking Shakespeare!" Dan defended. "A-And Shakespeare is known for being especially *friendly* towards guys in his sonnets. That was a different time, when the most meaningful relationship a guy could have was with another guy and girls were just for making babies. Calm down, Danny."

After taking a few deep breaths, Danny forced his racing heart to slow. The ghost boy mulled over what Dan had said and, finding some of it to be logical, allowed a shaky smile. "Y-You're right. Sorry I freaked out there."

Dan nodded briskly and turned to the kids, berating them for embarrassing Danny and implying things they shouldn't be. The children merely laughed gleefully. Danny watched them argue, content with letting Dan plead their case.

I'm not exactly qualified to do so, after all , Danny thought ruefully. The halfa couldn't deny that, when it was implied that Mandy and Dan knew each other a little too well, Danny had become extremely jealous. Admittedly, Danny didn't fool himself into thinking Dan had stayed a virgin or anything. Not that Danny was gay, but even he could admit that Dan was extremely attractive. When the murdering ghost turned up the charm, Danny figured not many could resist. It just hurt to know that there might be someone in the current timeline who knew Dan better than Danny did.

Their last week together was more than drills and training. During their breaks, Dan and Danny had talked—deep talks. Chats about video games, girls, and food eventually became conversations about life, death, and forgiveness. Dan admitted things to Danny that the halfa knew Dan would never trust *anyone* with. It made Danny feel special.

Especially more so when Danny realized that Dan would always be chained to Danny. When there would be no one else, they would have each other.

So, for someone to know Dan as well as Danny did meant that Dan had someone *other* than Danny to turn to. Danny knew Dan wasn't being literal about being chained to Danny's side. They could go a couple days without seeing each other before Dan's urges became too much to bear and the older ghost would appear and latch onto Danny. That meant Dan could leave whenever he wanted and just teleport back to Danny when the need arose. The rest of the time Dan could spend with someone equally as ruthless and evil as him.

Danny sighed. *Even if they're married, Mandy doesn't exactly seem faithful. There's no way MiniMandy is Grim's daughter. And I bet Dan would have no qualms about being with Mandy, even if she is married. Why wouldn't he prefer evil incarnate to me?*

W-Wait a minute , Danny's cheeks reddened as he thought about the implications. Why am I so worried about Dan's love life?! It shouldn't matter to me who he screws! He'll still be around to hang out! I don't...I mean...I'm not gay!

"DANNY!" someone shouted, shocking the half ghost out of his reverie.

"W-What?! Is something wrong?"

Dan gave him a skeptical look. "I've been calling you for five minutes. You were spacing out so badly, I thought you got lost in your head. Now then, I haven't dropped the subject and the kids

went to get us ice cream. Care to answer me? Why were you so passive aggressive earlier? Not that I did, but so *what* if I slept with their mom?"

"I-I..." Danny mumbled. "Don't you like her?"

Dan blinked.

And then it clicked.

He's jealous , Dan realized, working mightily to keep the crazed grin off his face. *The selfish little punk, he doesn't want me anywhere near Mandy* .

Better give him what he wants, then. Dan thought with amusement. *Danny never did do well with jealousy. He'll just end up pissing her off* .

"You did notice that she has *the most* emasculating gaze in the world, right?" Dan smirked. "Trying to sleep with her is like signing a death warrant. Probably why Grim is married to her. He doesn't have to worry about living through the experience."

Despite himself, Danny smiled. "I guess I was just worried that you'd...want to stay with Mandy. I-It's wrong to cheat and I don't want you disappointing Junior and Minnie."

Nice cover , Dan snorted mentally.

"Don't worry. I much prefer you over Mandy."

Danny started, glancing at Dan nervously. "W-What do you mean by that?"

Dan seemed unperturbed. "I prefer your company over hers. She may be evil, but you're more fun to hang around. I prefer people who have more than one facial expression."

"P-People?" Danny echoed.

Dan rolled his eyes. "Danny, I don't know what your malfunction is, but get it through your head—so long as the world doesn't end, you are pretty much stuck with me for eternity. Yours is the only company I find enjoyable. If I go to hang out somewhere, it'll probably be because you've gone out. I'm all yours, ghost boy."

Danny hid his face against his knees, trying to ignore the bright red of his cheeks and the large grin on his lips. "All mine, huh?"

"All *yours* . No homo."

"R-Right. No homo."

From the doorway, Minnie and Junior watched, the ice cream in their hands slowly melting. Junior turned to Minnie with a mischievous smile.

"Should we help them out?" he whispered.

"Even in death, true love will prevail. But death is here, and still they are not one. Mayhap they are in need of our guidance. Dearest brother, let us draw the bow's string; may we aim true, that two souls become one," she replied quietly.

"I'll take that as a yes."

And so time marches on...

Fun fact: Minnie speaks in iambic pentameter the entire chapter.

And, for those of you who aren't familiar, Grim and Mandy are from "The Grim Adventures of Billy and Mandy" and Junior and Minnie are original characters from "Grim Tales from Down Below" on Snafu Comics. My rendition is before the "What About Mimi" arc, which I didn't particularly care for.

Like I said, this is gonna be a chapter people will either love or hate. The inclusion of these characters from the Snafu comics was something I debated for a long time, but in the end, I went for it. I hope you guys like it too. I don't usually ask for reviews, but I would appreciate criticism on this chapter to see how well I incorporated the family Grim. If I get enough negative reviews, I suppose I'll redo the chapter.

But I honestly *really like* this chapter.

Schrodinger's Cat

So, I got some fantastic reviews concerning the last chapter, which made me immensely happy. Thank you to everyone who reviewed. In response to some reviews:

Sorry, but no. I won't be touching the "What About Mimi" Arc—one, it's not done yet and I hate making up stuff for something I'm currently invested in; two, I didn't like Mimi all that much anyway (which may stem from my Junior/Minnie bias). Maybe I'll like her later.

Kimori Takahashi asked if there would be future "lime" scenes. Yes, this story is mature for a reason. As KT and I agreed, Dan is a very sexual character. This story isn't going to engage in sex, but it will definitely get hot and heavy.

And I really cannot thank you guys enough for all the support I got after Chapter 5. It was a limb that was not planned on at all—in my notes, I briefly considered mentioning Grim and I had stumbled upon "Grim Tales from Down Below" entirely by accident just before finishing Chapter 5. After that, I completely reworked the chapter, and I'm glad to see it was to good effect. Thanks again. I promise to thank people a little more personally after life calms down a bit. I applied for the JET Programme and have been basically dying to hear whether or not I'm on the short list.

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brother, let us draw the bow's string; may we aim true, that two souls become one," she replied quietly.

"I'll take that as a yes."

"So, the theory of Schrodinger's cat is that, within the box, the possibilities of the cat being alive and dead exist at the same time; it is only once we've looked into the box that reality collapses and that we are forced to see the cat as either alive or dead," Lancer explained to a class that was only half listening.

Danny had long since learned to make a copy of himself—intangible and invisible—that would sit in Danny's lectures and listen to the lessons for him. Danny would still retain the information, while being able to think on other matters or (most often) run off to fight ghosts. And the last three days had definitely merited the down time.

Their first visit to hell certainly wasn't their last; Dan and Danny visited every evening, well after midnight, so that Maddie wouldn't catch on. None of them had forgotten that she forbade Danny's training during his last year of school, but once Danny had been informed that the Observers planned to ask *Walker* to be the new Master of Time, Danny knew it was inevitable. Since then, Danny and Dan spent their evenings playing games with Junior and Minnie, which always left Danny more and more exhausted—especially since Dan preferred to stay on Minnie and Junior's team. Danny had begun to suspect that their games were actually a twisted form of training for him, what with their games forcing Danny to newer and more extreme heights with his powers.

Blue eyes glanced at "Erza," watching the supposed teenager engage in lively banter with Paulina. Danny frowned; Dan had been keeping a secret of his own from Danny as well, leading Danny to think there was more to their problem than just the Observers. But Dan had so far refused to even divulge a hint, and Danny had long ago learned that guessing would get him nowhere.

Jazz had already returned to her college, periodically calling to check on both Dan and Danny. She insisted it was only to remind them that she was there to talk, but she seemed to spend more time on the phone with Dan and their conversations would always leave Dan in a huff.

Then there was *the touching* .

It started off innocently enough—a hand on the shoulder here, a pat on the head there—but suddenly Danny got the feeling that Dan wasn't being honest concerning those touches, either. Danny would notice the contact would last much longer than just a friendly brushing or a comforting hand. When they walked through the Castle Grim, Dan's hand would land on the small of Danny's back, leading the younger ghost through the castle. It would have been nice—if it weren't a distinctly possessive action. Or there would be times when Dan's hand would cup the side of Danny's face—usually with a good enough excuse, like Danny having been hit particularly harshly during training or because there was something on Danny's face. But then, Dan would check Danny's face and his hand would linger; sometimes his hands even caressed Danny's face, ever so gently, so that Danny would think he imagined the whole thing.

The staring was distracting. Dan had a bad habit of staring at Danny—especially in class—and it was becoming noticeable to Danny and anyone else with (or without) functioning eyes. Danny would frequently catch the older ghost, only for Dan to smirk and *keep on staring* . It was unnerving, to say the least. Even more so, because Danny was starting to think he didn't exactly *mind* the attention.

Despite all his odd quirks, Dan had been invaluable as a teacher. Danny's combat and leadership skills were rapidly improving, to the point that Dan's training sessions had less to do with the physical manifestations of their powers and more with their growing friendship. Sam, Tucker, Dash, and Kwan had yet to apologize—though both Danny and Dan knew that they would eventually come around—so Danny found himself spending more time getting to know his alternate future self. Between homework and spars, Danny

found out that Dan liked the sunset ("I love the blood red color"), that he preferred vegetables to meat ("Processed meat is so bad for you..."), and that Dan listened to classical music ("Especially arias; they're so haunting. Ha, get it?"). In return, Danny had confided in Dan things that he'd never told anyone, not even Sam. Danny had told Dan about the week when Danny had gone to the ghost zone to hunt down a fight and ended up spending his time with Ember; the time Danny had scared girls into not pursuing him so that Danny would have some modicum of peace after he'd been ousted as Danny Phantom; and the time Danny had been actively considering suicide, if only so that he could leave his mundane human life behind and just be Danny Phantom forever.

Their closeness should have been bothering Danny, but the young halfa found that he didn't mind having a confidant in Dan. Unlike his other friends, who'd immediately start wondering what was wrong with Danny and what they needed to fix, Dan never judged him. Danny had expected to get a lecture from Dan about valuing his life and how suicide wasn't the answer; instead, Dan understood Danny's feelings and offered him comforting silence.

The bell rang and all the students jumped out of their seats, rushing to the hallways. Danny took his time, catching Sam's regretful glance as she passed by. Dan clapped a hand on Danny's shoulder, making Danny pause.

"Yeah, Ezra?" he asked.

Dan grinned. "Paulina invited us to eat with her. I appreciate your trying to get me acclimated after our first disastrous introduction to your other friends,"—their excuse for disappearing during lunch these last few days, Danny remembered—"but Paulina is cool. Would you mind?"

"Nah, that's fine. Let's go," Danny shrugged, following the pair.

Probably the most frustrating aspect of their new friendship was Danny's newfound possessiveness. Danny was nothing if not honest

to himself, now, so when he first experienced that familiar tightening in his chest and the involuntary grind of his teeth, Danny's only real conundrum was trying to figure out why he was jealous. Dan was allowed to have other friends, after all (that was the whole point of going to high school, in fact), but Danny still felt as though Dan should only be a close friend to Danny. Only Danny could *truly* understand Dan and only Dan could *truly* understand Danny. Anyone else seemed threatening to their fragile, but immediate, bond.

Danny originally thought he wouldn't have much to fear from Paulina, but apparently, their mutual love for themselves drove Dan and Paulina's friendship.

"So, what do you put on your hands to make them so soft?" Dan asked, grabbing his lunch tray.

"You wouldn't believe what I have to do to make them this way!" Paulina gushed, following him. "Papi makes me wash the dishes, so I have to make sure to use extra-strength lotion for really dry skin, because soap just does horrible things to you."

Dan pouted. "I completely sympathize. Danny's mom makes me clean the bathroom when she's particularly annoyed with me, and my hands get so dry."

Danny rolled his eyes, trailing behind the two. "To be fair, you did set the lab on fire."

"I was conducting an important experiment."

"You were trying to toast bread because the toaster in the kitchen was occupied."

Paulina giggled. "You two argue like a married couple."

Danny's face flushed red and Paulina smirked at him. In the years since his revealing, Paulina's affections had gone from stalkerish to cordial. Though they never spoke to each other on a regular basis—

Sam and Paulina's legendary hatred for each other had never abated, after all—they shared friendly greetings in the hallway and weren't opposed to working together. Still, Danny was convinced Paulina (and most girls) had a secret that made her more attuned to the inner workings of boys. Whenever Paulina's sharp gaze fell on him, Danny always felt exposed.

"So, where are we sitting?" he asked, hoping to change the subject.

Paulina allowed it. "At the tree. Since you stole my old cronies, Star and I tend to eat there nowadays. Not that she'll be joining us today—poor thing is sick."

She smiled good-naturedly, taking the bite out of her comment. Danny smiled back, shrugging. "I hope she gets better soon. And, I think you can take them back, if you want," he joked.

"Oh, no. I'm doing much better without. Why are they suddenly shunning you, though, Ghost Boy?"

Dan rolled his eyes. "They're not so much shunning Danny as they are me."

Danny scowled. "They don't like my... *association* with Ezra and have made it perfectly clear. They'll get over it soon, but in the meantime, I'm certainly not going to beg them for companionship."

"I agree," Paulina nodded sagely, smiling thankfully as Dan held the door open for her. "They need to let you make new friends and explore your options. You don't have to marry Sam like they all want."

Danny smirked, handing his lunch tray to Dan; he took the blanket Paulina was carrying under her arm and spread it on the ground for them. "Does that mean I should be marrying you?"

"Don't be coy, Danny," she laughed as she took her seat. "I'm okay with your being bi. You should be able to date Ezra if you want."

Danny, who was lowering himself to the ground, lost his footing and fell down. "E-Excuse me?!"

Dan guffawed as he sat down next to Danny, handing the boy back his tray. "Careful there, Danny-boy."

Danny glared at him, then rounded back on Paulina. "What makes you think we're *dating*?"

Paulina quirked an eyebrow. "You're kidding, right? You two aren't exactly subtle about it. Why do you think I quit hitting on Ezra on the first day? He was *obviously* only interested in you. And, from what I'm seeing, you're only interested in him."

"I'm not!" Danny insisted, cheeks red, "We're just good friends."

"We're a little bit dating, Danny," Dan shrugged, smirking.

"We are not!"

The Latina giggled. "Oh, Danny. You're so in denial. It's kind of cute. So, if it's not because you're dating, why *are* they shunning Ezra?"

Danny came up short; he hadn't thought of an excuse for that, figuring that no one else would care. Despite their cordiality, it's not as though he and Paulina talked often. Before Dan, Danny never had a reason to talk to someone who was outside of the group. Thankfully, Dan took pity on him.

"You're partially right, chica. They don't like Danny spending all his time with me," Dan replied, frowning. "Danny and I became pretty quick friends and I know all his training habits, since we live together. So, they're peeved I'm putting in my own little suggestions for his superhero-ing. They think 'Team Phantom' is the world's most exclusive club."

Paulina rolled her eyes. "Geez, Danny. I know they're your friends and they've been there for everything, but they're kind of selfish."

Danny raised a brow. "Really? Coming from you? No offense."

"None taken," Paulina waved amicably, "But, coming from me? Yes , really. I know selfishness like the back of my hand—I excel at it. I can see very well when other people are being selfish. I know they probably don't mean to, but it is really cool and special to be part of a team and to be friends with a famous superhero. Remember how desperate Star got when I started hanging out with you? She started dating Tucker and everything. And Kwan attached himself to Sam. When people lose what they're used to and what they cherish, they get defensive."

"Wow, Paulina," Danny huffed out a laugh. "You are surprisingly wise about all this."

Pauline smirked. "Just because I'm a class-A bitch doesn't mean I'm an airhead. That's such an old stereotype, Danny. Get with the times."

"I'll try to remember that," Danny smiled.

"So, what, did you guys not used to be as friendly as you are now?" Dan asked, sounding genuinely curious. Paulina launched into the tale of their freshman year with gusto, leaving Danny to his thoughts.

Was Paulina actually right? Danny frowned; he didn't think he and Dan seemed like much of a couple, but then, Mandy and Grim were *married* . As much as he and Dan got along—especially with the rest of the group still ignoring them—Danny supposed he could see why Paulina would think he and Dan were getting closer than most people. But Danny was having trouble seeing how his association with Dan had been bad so far. Besides the initial rocks they'd had to traverse when Dan was released, Dan had been nothing but (his version of) cordial. He treated the Fenton family with some modicum of kindness; he was especially close to Jazz, if those phone calls were any indications; and he never judged Danny and was an invaluable listener. Although it was the beginning of the year, Danny had already been thinking of the companion he'd be allowed, and he

was sort of shocked to realize that he was hoping his companion would be Dan. Sure, the physical aspect of a relationship would be stunted and absent—Danny wasn't gay, thank you very much—but the rest would be there. Everything he craved in a relationship with Sam, Dan was able to provide for Danny.

Danny blanched—what did it say about Danny that he seriously compared his *heterosexual, romantic* relationship with Sam to his *completely and utterly platonic* relationship with his *alternate future self* ? Danny groaned, utterly confused and—

"Ow!" Danny cried, rubbing his head. He glared at Dan, who smiled innocently in reply.

"Are you back with the living, Danny?" the older ghost asked. "The nice lady asked you a question."

"Uh, sorry, Paulina," Danny shook his head, turning to the laughing girl. "What did you say?"

"I *asked* if you were thinking of getting back together with that Goth chick of yours, but I think I have my answer."

For someone with inherent ice powers, his cheeks were constantly on fire nowadays. "Sam and I are better off as friends," he recited. "Why do you ask?"

"Because she's staring at you pretty hardcore with that scrunchy expression she gets whenever she's jealous," Paulina said, pointing at Sam.

Sure enough, Danny turned to see Sam—along with Tucker, Kwan, and Dash—watching Danny, Dan, and Paulina from afar. Sam, in particular, had an expression Danny was all-too-familiar with. He sighed dejectedly.

"That's not her jealous face. That's her I-think-something-is-wrong-with-you-and-I'm-gonna-corner-you-and-tell-you-over-and-over-until-

you-agree face," the ghost boy groaned.

"Well, all that means is we don't let her corner you," Dan scoffed. "You *do* have ghost powers, right? Or have I confused you with someone else?"

"Sam can be persistent when she wants to be," Danny sighed. "She'll probably catch us at home."

"Then come to my place," Paulina smirked, raising a brow in good humor. "She'll probably be too scared of getting infected with my prep disease to come anywhere near it."

"I'm down with that," Dan said before Danny could get a word in, "And I totally want to spend time with you rather than steal your magical lotions."

As Dan and Paulina mock-fought over her skin moisturizers, Danny glanced back at the table with his friends. They were no longer looking in his direction, but Danny could tell by their hunched shoulders and drawn-together heads that they were discussing how to approach their newfound problem. Danny had hoped they'd come to their senses, what with the weekend giving them some time away from each other, but it was already Tuesday and there seemed to be no progress on that front. With a sigh, Danny figured the safest place to hide out probably *was* Paulina's house.

"Sounds good," he announced, interrupting the vanity club, "I've only ever been to your place once, anyway."

"Oh, yeah! That disastrous date!" Paulina laughed. "I should have held onto you rather than give you back to the Goth."

Dan pouted. "You should have. I probably could've stolen all your moisturizers much more easily if he was dating you."

"When did you get so obsessed with having smooth skin?" Danny asked, deadpan.

"I've always been obsessed with looking amazing," Dan replied, turning up his nose. "You just don't pay enough attention to me."

"Uh-oh," Paulina teased, "You're going to have to buy Ezra some serious jewelry to make up for being a bad boyfriend, Danny!"

"I prefer diamonds, thank you," Dan didn't miss a beat.

Danny grinned. "I'll bear that in mind for our one-month anniversary."

"Be sure to skip the paper anniversary, Danny. This is a fourteen-carat mistake," the Latina said.

As they laughed, Danny realized that Dan's first week as a non-sociopathic murderer was through.

Maybe I should get him an anniversary gift after all...

The bell rung, always obnoxiously loud, and Dan and Danny followed a strutting Paulina to the curb. Unlike the other plebeians, Paulina didn't have to walk home or take a bus. As soon as she stepped up to the edge of the sidewalk, a black car rolled up. Clearly used to it, Paulina opened the door and greeted her father, explaining about her houseguests for the evening. With a suspicious glare—especially at Danny (which amused Dan endlessly)—Mr. Sanchez allowed for Dan and Danny to also enter the car in the backseat. As they waited for the car to pull away from the school, Dan spotted Sam and the others standing by the entrance, with varying expressions on their faces, but all of those expressions fixed on the car he and Danny occupied. Tucker, Dan could see, was slowly becoming disillusioned with being separated from Danny; Dan figured it meant Tucker was slowly seeing Dan's reform and was less convinced with whatever violent fantasies their combined paranoia had concocted. Kwan looked worried, but stood closer to Tucker—possibly, Dan assumed, because Kwan was leaning towards agreeing with Tucker instead of Sam. Dash and Sam stood close together, glaring at Dan; they presented a united front and were

likely the reason Danny's group of friends had held out so long. Dan could see the anger melding with confusion and shock on Sam's face; she very much wanted to talk to Danny, probably, and maybe even offer to get to know Dan better, but she was probably feeling betrayed by Danny choosing to spend time with Paulina. Dan could see it clearly: Danny had already rankled their close relationship by choosing Dan over his friends (a victory Dan would forever bask in). Now, Danny was spending time with Paulina, whom Sam likely refused to acknowledge was a human being. Dan scoffed.

As much as Sam accused Paulina of being shallow, Sam sure was blind to her own limiting prejudices.

Then again, like most of the world, there was a part of Sam that likely didn't want to let go of the past. Now that everyone knew who Danny was, it wasn't a sacred secret between Sam and her only two close friends. The novelty of "Danny Phantom" had long worn off and now Sam was left alone, to wonder at what her own accomplishments were in the intervening years—which, of course, were none, Dan thought with a nasty smile. Some tiny part of Dan actually sympathized for Sam (likely the part from Danny); after all, the girl *had* dedicated years of her life to Danny and his secret and, of the three of them, she was the only one who was never acknowledged for her work. All she ever had was their friendship and closeness and, now, that was slowly dissipating—in the form of Dash and Kwan, in the form of Paulina, and in the form of Dan, who all took more and more of Danny and left Sam to realize that the staunch humanist of the group had chosen to live her life for someone else.

Unless someone actually looked at her, Sam didn't exist. Tucker Foley had his name etched in history as the youngest mayor of Amity Park (and, indeed, the whole of the United States). Daniel Fenton was Amity Park's own ghost hero, who saved the world on countless occasions with a smile and an encouraging speech. A freaking statue of his likeness was in every capital of the world, for crying out loud. Samantha Manson? She was the cat in the box, existing in two

opposite states until someone cared to look at her; the way things were going, it seemed Sam realized less and less people were going to.

"I can practically *hear* you thinking," Danny whispered with a smile. "Penny for your thoughts?"

"Exactly how cheap do you think I am, Danny?" the sociopath retorted.

"Put me on layaway. What were you thinking so seriously about?"

Dan shrugged. "Just thinking about how we got to this point."

"Seems like we're all doing a lot of thinking lately," Danny sighed, glancing away. "I feel like I've been trapped in my head for days."

Dan smirked. "Not much of a thinker, eh Danny-boy?"

Danny shoved him, careful to make sure Mr. Sanchez didn't see them. "Shut up; you know what I mean. There's so much to think about that I feel like I'm not *doing* anything. I don't feel prepared at all to take over and now we've got this Walker business hanging over our heads. Sam and the others are being difficult for—apparently—the fun of it and I can't stop thinking about..."

Dan raised a brow when Danny didn't continue. "About...?" he prompted.

Danny bit his lip. "About the person who's gonna be my companion when I become the master of time."

"What *about* them?"

"I..." Danny's cheeks flushed ever so slightly. "I have an idea of who I'd like to be, despite it being so soon, but I feel bad condemning anyone to being my companion for eternity."

"Or however long you decide you want to be in power, anyway," Dan corrected flippantly.

"What?"

The disguised ghost frowned. "Did you not know that? I mean, it's obvious. Clockwork doesn't want to be the master of time, so he's pawning it off to you. You'll enjoy it for a few centuries, maybe even millennia if your companion is up to snuff, but eventually you'll give it up, too, right? Did you think you'd be the ghost of time forever?"

Danny nodded dumbly, prompting an eye roll from Dan.

"No, *genius*. Time, like space, is infinite. Even you, with your disgustingly hero-like qualities couldn't stand it for that long. Eventually, you will decide to pass it on, like Clockwork is passing on the mantle to you."

Danny cocked his head to the side. "So...what of my companion? What happens to them when I pass on to true death?"

Dan shrugged again. "They pass on also, I assume. You'll have to take that up with Grim, to be honest."

Still, the ghost boy's countenance was confused. "What if...what if my companion doesn't *want* to pass on?"

Dan glanced at him. "...Like me?"

Danny's back became ramrod straight and the younger ghost suddenly found the window incredibly interesting. Dan grinned.

"Let's say you pick me as your companion," Dan began, pretending to be oblivious to the tension in Danny's shoulders. "And I don't want to pass on. I assume I have three options...no, two."

Danny glanced back at the correction.

"One: I pass on whether I want to or not, because there is no guarantee the next master of time is gonna want me around. Two: I remain in the realm and either continue to be a companion, or I just wander around the ghost zone like a regular ghost."

"What was option three?"

"Option three doesn't exist for me," Dan replied quietly.

Danny swallowed. "Why not?"

"Option three is reincarnation," the sociopath said, staring into Danny's blue eyes.

"R-Reincarnation?"

"Seriously, do you not listen in Ghost 101?" Dan smirked weakly.

"Reincarnation, yes. If Grim, Clockwork, and a third impartial party agree, a ghost can be brought back in a new body."

"Third party?"

" *Impartial* third party," Dan nodded. "Usually someone very removed from the realms dealing with death."

"Who?"

"Couldn't tell you."

Danny was quiet for a second. Then—"So...why would it not apply to you?"

Dan chuckled. "As if anyone would willingly allow a sociopathic serial killer to be reincarnated. Besides, I may be me, but I am two different souls melded together. The two halves would likely reunite with their original bearers, and I'd no longer exist as myself."

Knowing that, how could Danny ask Dan to exist with him when Danny became master of time? The risk that Dan could cease to

exist—something Dan very much craved—was high. Perhaps Danny could hold out for a few millennia, but Dan was right; after a while, even a long while, Danny would crave a true death of his own and want to pass on. How could he be selfish enough to give Dan an uncertain future? Even if Dan's future were to still be uncertain, at least as a free ghost, Dan could come and go as he pleased and not worry about being tied to the clock tower. Danny sighed; *maybe I should let Clockwork know I'll be better off alone.*

"But don't go martyring yourself just yet," Dan suddenly said, grinning. "If you leave, I leave. Don't sweat the details."

"W-Why?" Danny choked.

Dan's eyes were going to disappear into his head at this rate. " *Obviously* , I can't exist sanely unless you exist. If you leave, those 'primal urges' we talked about will take over and I'll revert to that thing I was the first time we separated. I'd rather be wiped from existence than lose my mind. It's the sexiest thing about me."

Danny let out a startled laugh. "I...really?"

Dan pouted. "Yes, *really* . Didn't you hear? Brains are the new black."

The halfa slapped a hand over his mouth, desperately trying to keep his laughter contained, lest they interrupt Paulina and her father's conversation. When he finally calmed down, he tried speaking again.

"So...if I leave, you'll go insane? Why doesn't any of this apply to Vlad?"

Dan *shuddered* , almost throwing Danny back into hysterics. " *Vlad* ? That guy's picture is next to the definition of 'creepy' in the Oxford Dictionary. I suppose if I were closer to Vlad, the same would apply."

Suddenly, Danny didn't feel like laughing; he felt sick.

"But, I've been much more in contact with you than I have been with Vlad, even before this whole business with Clockwork, so the half of me that feels most complete is the half coming from you. If Vlad got near me, maybe I might feel a slight pull, but not to the degree I feel with you."

Choosing to ignore the reasons why, Danny smiled, a glowing feeling in his chest. He cleared his throat awkwardly, but the smile would not recede. "Good. I mean, that's good."

Dan raised a brow.

"I'd rather have you on my side than his, is all," Danny continued, flustered.

"Sure, Danny. Whatever you say."

And so time marches on...

Sorry this took so long and that this chapter is shorter than I wanted it to be. There was so much backstory here, I decided to stop it. Continuing from here in this chapter felt disjointed to me, so we'll visit Paulina's house next chapter. As always, thanks for the love!

Gaze

I can't tell you how much reviews motivate and excite me to write more and to write better. I got an entire slew of reviews from Winter's Twilight, and immediately started to write this chapter after I noticed s/he was going to review every chapter. I know not everyone has much to say, and I generally try not to fish for reviews, but they really make a person's day.

Thanks to all the other reviewers as well; I'm glad no one was terribly confused by my use of quantum physics in the last chapter—that, along with the inclusion of Paulina, was something I was a bit worried about. But no one's claiming to hate Paulina so far, so yeah.

Onward.

(As for last chapter not ending in "And so time marches on...", that was a mistake of mine that has been rectified.)

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"Sure, Danny. Whatever you say."

And so time marches on...

" *Mi casa es su casa* ," Paulina announced as they walked into her large room. She twirled around and smiled at them. "Well? What do you think? Pretty chic, no?"

Danny whistled; the room was easily the size of the Fenton living room, with a walk-in closet to boot. Contrary to what the halfa might have once believed, the room was not the Guinness World Record holder for the largest gathering of pink things in an enclosed space. The room was a mix of deep browns and greens—surprisingly earthly colors for a girl who didn't care how many holes her hair spray was burning into the o-zone layer. Against the wall was a queen-sized bed; cabinets lined the walls where the closet was; and a book shelf filled to the brim with books stood against the wall with a small balcony.

"Wow, I didn't take you for much of a literature enthusiast," Danny said bluntly.

"College is coming up, Danny," Paulina explained, "and I've found that I'm good at certain things when I try."

"Like what?" Dan asked, sitting down on the bed.

"Like math," the Latina replied flippantly.

Danny grinned. "Yeah?"

"Yes! I think I could be a mathematician or a secret agent."

Dan grabbed at a book at random, flipped to a page, and smirked. "What is 198449351 to the third power?"

Paulina scoffed. "You're joking, right? It's obviously 78153 61098 83809 42419 90551. Duh."

Danny and Dan wore matching expressions of incredulity.

"Holy shit," Dan finally muttered, glancing between Paulina and the textbook. "I think you got that right."

"Of course I did," Paulina huffed. "I *told* you I was good at math."

"Paulina," Danny laughed, still somewhat shocked, "There's being good at math and then there's being a genius! I didn't know you had it in you! You could've..."

Paulina cocked her head. "Could have what, Ghost Boy?"

Danny pursed his lips. "You could've helped us. When we were saving the world from the Disasteroid. Do you know how much quicker everything would've been done if you'd been on the team with a mind like that? Even Valerie helped, and she's got some serious skills, but not like that."

Paulina shrugged, looking insecure for the first time since Danny met her. "Who would've taken me seriously back then? I did everything I could to play up the 'air-headed popular girl' shtick."

"Why?"

"I like attention," Paulina muttered. "No one in my family gave me attention, but then I grew into my hips and boys started noticing me...but no one liked a brainiac. So, I pretended to be dumb and people liked me more. Until I realized that no one really *liked* me, they liked hating me." She groaned, plopping down next to Dan. "You wouldn't understand."

Danny sighed. "I...I would. Understand, that is. Sometimes...when I'm Danny *Phantom*, I feel like I'm really me. When no one knew who I was, Phantom became an identity where I could let it all go and stop wearing a mask at school. Now that everyone knows, they think they know the real me, but I still only feel like I'm really *Danny*

when I'm *Danny Phantom* . Fenton...he just sort of worked to cover how I really feel and who I really am."

Dan frowned. "You guys sound like you sure enjoyed making your lives complicated."

Paulina chuckled. "Was it easy in Australia?"

Dan shrugged. "Down under, it was always good to wake up the next day. Not saying that your feelings aren't valid, but before you start bogging yourself down with all this masks business, remember that the only one imposing that on you is you. It could be worse; you could've woken up looking at a croc, after all."

"A croc?" Danny scrunched his nose in amusement. "Who was your roommate back in Australia? Crocodile Dundee?"

"Ha ha," Dan deadpanned, rolling his eyes. "Let's stop talking about my frankly awesome former roommate—"

"What, seriously?" Danny muttered to a giggling Paulina.

"—and focus on the fact that your so-called friends won't be put off for long just because you're hiding in the cave of wonders."

"Speaking of wonders, let's discuss your problems over some *horchata* and some *pasteles* ." The Latina giggled, "I can see why your friends were so reluctant to give this up, Danny. Plotting against people is so much fun!"

She exited the room and both ghosts waited a few seconds before they felt comfortable enough to talk.

" *Crocodile Dundee* ?" Dan deadpanned. "That was the best you could do?"

"Oh, sure, Mr. Cave-of-wonders," Danny retorted. "Wit is obviously your middle name."

Dan sobered. "We really do need to talk, though."

"I...yeah, we do. What are we gonna do? We can't have Sam and the others hanging around the house, or mom will start getting suspicious about us 'not training.' As far as mom knows, we're still doing my usual training with the others. When she finds out we haven't hung out with them in almost a week..."

Dan scowled. "But we can't afford to stop training, either. Even if we stop combat training, we still need to go to the Castle Grim to play with Minnie and Junior."

"Play? *You're* the ones having fun while I die all over again."

Dan grinned. "Better than the alternative."

"*Anyway*," Danny sighed. "What are we going to do about this?"

"Maybe if we could come up with a plausible excuse as to why we would disappear for hours at a time without arousing undue suspicion. Something teenagers do anyway and—though it would probably get us punished—wouldn't cause your mom to be more attentive to us."

Danny swallowed. There *was* something that would cover that, but there was no way his mother would buy it.

If we were sneaking out for...other things...

"But short of having an illicit, semi-narcissistic affair, I'm coming up short on ideas," Dan shrugged.

Immediately comforted, Danny smiled. "Yeah, I was thinking along those lines myself. I'm glad I'm not the only one. But there's no way mom would allow us to be in the same country after hearing that excuse."

Dan pouted. "Even though I'm totally not trying to corrupt your innocence."

"You absolutely are, but I'll forgive you."

Dan stuck his tongue out at Danny, prompting the younger ghost to laugh. They sank into a comfortable silence, thinking on their conundrum. Danny's eyes were focused on one spot of the room; Dan swore that corner was going to erupt in flames. Dan stared at his counterpart for a while, but eventually looked away when he was ignored; perhaps he'd find the answers somewhere other than Danny's face. False green eyes scanned Paulina's room in a deceptively lazy manner. The Danny Phantom poster on the Latina's ceiling caught Dan's attention, making him roll his eyes.

And then inspiration struck.

"Paulina!" Dan grinned.

Danny glanced towards the doorway, then back at Dan. "What about her. She's not here..."

"No, not that. Remember our illicit and sensual affair?"

"Not as sensual as you're making it sound," Danny replied, thoroughly amused.

"It's not my fault you never put out."

Dan watched with satisfaction as a deep red blush spread across Danny's face. "As I was saying," the older ghost resumed, " *Paulina* can be your illicit affair."

"Paulina?" Danny muttered. After a moment, blue eyes lit up. "You're right! Paulina and I pretend to be dating secretly—"

"—Because Papi doesn't approve—"

"—And you come along because—"

"—You and I use 'training' as an excuse for you to go see Paulina—"

"—Which is genius, because we'll be using what we're actually doing as our cover story to mom—"

"—And she can't punish you too harshly because it's not your fault her dad doesn't approve—"

"—And if we can manage to get Paulina's dad in on it, mom will hear the same story from Mr. Sanchez—"

"—And we're scot free, cause even if we're missing late at night—"

"—Mom will think it's because I've snuck out to see Paulina! Dan, you're a genius!" Danny laughed, jumping on the bed next to the surprised ghost. "It's so simple, it's ridiculous! Sam and Tucker would've come up with some convoluted plan like using the Tuckerbot!"

Dan snorted, lounging back on the bed. "I *am* a twenty-eight year old evil genius; I'd like to think I can come up with good ideas every once in while."

Danny sat back, smiling beatifically at Dan. "We can make this work, Dan! I'll be the new Clockwork in no time, thanks to you. And you'll be right there next to—" Danny suddenly flushed, his head turning away violently.

"I'll be next to...?" Dan raised a brow.

"Nothing, forget it." Danny shrugged jerkily.

Dan's brow creased. "No, I don't think I will. Next to what?"

"Stop it, Dan," Danny frowned. "Leave it be."

"Why? What will I be next to?" the older ghost persisted.

"You'll be next to unconscious if you keep bothering me," Danny muttered tetchily.

Dan growled. "Hey! I wasn't the one who said anything; *excuse me* for being a little curious as to what your plans are for me. I kind of want to know if I'm gonna be erased!"

"Maybe I *should* erase you!" Danny spat, crossing his arms.

"What the hell brought that on?!"

"Why have you been so nice?" Danny hissed, whipping his head around, glaring green eyes boring into Dan. "Why haven't you been the colossal asshole I *know* you want to be? Why do you keep being nice? Why have you been pretending you care about what I say? Why are you trying to keep me from my friends? *Why have you been touching me ?!*"

Dan's face was stony as he stared back at Danny; the only indication of his rising ire was the red bleeding into his eyes—and the awful grinding sound of Dan's teeth.

"Because, *you motherfucking brat* , I don't want to be erased."

Danny seemed to deflate a bit. "That's the only reason?"

Dan sobered. "What other reason would I need?"

"Maybe...I thought you were at least warming up to us being friends," Danny whispered. "I forgot you were a sociopath, I guess."

Dan groaned, falling back onto the bed. "What the hell is taking Paulina so long?"

"That's all you have to say?" the halfa demanded.

"You're the one obviously trying to get out of this conversation!"

"Well, I'm not now! Answer me!" Danny practically yelled, getting up on his knees.

"Quiet down, will you?" Dan scowled, raising himself on his elbows to glare at his younger self. "We can't have Paulina's dad hearing our little *domestic* ."

" *Paulina, Paulina, Paulina* ," Danny mocked in a whiny voice, "That's all you talk about! *She's* all you talk about!"

Dan rolled his eyes incredulously. "We're in her fucking house!"

"We weren't before!"

Dan scoffed, falling back onto the bed. "How did we even get to talking about this? *What* are we even arguing about!?"

"You never answered me," Danny sighed.

"What am I supposed to be answering?"

"Why are you not acting like yourself?"

Dan sighed, turning to face Amity Park's hero. "Maybe you didn't actually *know* me. I was trying to kill our family at the time, if you recall. Not exactly the best example of my shining personality."

Danny smirked ruefully. "Yeah, I guess I can't really judge a guy when he's trying to kill me."

Red eyes faded back to green, reconstructing Dan's disguise. He sat up with a sigh, facing a visibly subdued Danny. "What was all that about, Danny? Don't dodge me this time; I think I deserve to know."

"I'm angry," Danny whispered miserably. "I'm so, so angry and I needed to take it out on someone. But, you're not acting like the Dan I remember, so I have no reason to be mad at you. I'm mad at Sam and Dash, because I know they're the ones instigating all this crap between us; I hate that they can't trust me. I hate that I feel like you're a great friend, but I know I shouldn't trust you; and even if I did, you're hiding something from me and I'm dying to know what."

Don't get me wrong," Danny ran a frustrated hand through his hair, leaning against the headboard beside Dan. "I'm excited I get to be the Master of Time, but I thought this would be one transition in my life that would be drama free, for the most part. But now my friends who have supported me since forever aren't talking to me; the people I least expect to understand me actually understand me the most; I'm hanging out with the children of *death and evil* on a regular basis..."

"And?" Dan prompted quietly.

"And my only confidante is you," the ghost boy eventually sighed. "You're the only one I can really confide in and I want you to be around so I can *keep* confiding in you, but not if...not if you don't feel the same way."

"The same way?" Dan deadpanned. "Is this the world's most fucked up confession or something?"

Danny laughed, some of the tension leaving his shoulders. "No, idiot. I just—I don't want to force you to stay with me for eternity if that's not what you want, but I *do* . I *do* want to force you to be my companion, so that I have a reliable friend for the next few millennia. But it makes me feel super guilty. What if you want to have your own life, and I deny you that? Besides, you're a sociopath. You don't actually feel things the way I do, so what if this...this attachment is completely one-sided and you're just using it to your advantage?"

The older ghost worked hard to keep the smirk off his face; he hadn't expected Danny to explode like this for a while, but it certainly made things easier. Now, Danny trusted Dan enough to be honest with Dan, despite the inevitable embarrassment talking about his feelings would bring. Even better?

Danny trusted Dan to *reciprocate* , even if subconsciously.

"You're right," Dan finally said when the younger ghost's agitation was becoming more obvious. "I don't feel emotions the way you feel

them. The only time I seem to feel guilt or regret or sadness is when it concerns my family and—honestly—those feelings only seem to be a holdover from your ghost half that's inside me. Without the human half, those emotions will only apply to the people I last associated them with, so I'll never be able to feel emotions the way you're describing them. But—" Danny's head perked up—"that doesn't mean I don't feel. I'm just mean about it; I'm manipulative; I'm cruel and angry and I would rather take what I want when it's denied than go through conventional methods. So, if I'm trying to keep your friends from you? It's my selfish way of ensuring we get closer. I know they'll be back—there's only so long your friends will put up with the smell of their own shit, after all—but right now, you're only focusing on me."

Danny's eyes softened. "That's really terrible."

"You're not complaining much," Dan grinned crookedly.

"I guess not."

Dan sat up. "I can't be that caring friend you really want; I'm not Tucker or Sam, so I won't baby the hell out of you. But I'm stuck by you, whether I want to be or not...and I honestly don't mind, because I'm selfish and narcissistic. This...'attachment' may not be exactly the same on both sides, but I like to think it's equal. You're not boring and aggravating. For all your superheroism, you're kind of an asshole, which is endlessly amusing. Part of you is in me, and—as we've covered—I'll always be attracted to that part, so I'll always be fascinated by you."

"Now who's spouting the world's most fucked up confession?" Danny grinned.

"Fuck you," Dan retorted. "And all you've done is prove how tedious emotions are."

"Oh, shut up!" Danny cried, launching himself at Dan. Midway through his assault, the pillow under his knee caused Danny to slip;

instead of tackling Dan to the ground like he'd intended, Danny ended up in Dan's lap. Immediately, Dan's arms wound around Danny's waist—the faster it was, the more it would seem like instinct to the ghost boy. Danny, meanwhile, was torn between the feeling of being in Dan's arms and the volley of thoughts ricocheting in his head. A deep blush covered his face— *again*, Danny cursed to himself—and Danny debated how he could make this seem less awkward. After a beat of silence, Danny chanced a glance at Dan's face; Dan didn't seem perturbed in the slightest. In fact, he seemed smug, the old bastard. Danny sat up in a huff, pouting at Dan. When Dan only smirked, Danny punched the taller ghost on the shoulder.

"Ow!" he complained. "Jesus, Mary, and Joseph Stalin—what the hell was that for?"

"N-nothing," the halfa muttered, "What were you talking about earlier?" Danny asked petulantly.

"Earlier?" Dan figured he could ignore the abrupt change; after all they'd talked about, a subject change was welcome.

"When you said the games we play with Junior and Minnie are better than the alternative. What's the alternative?"

"I come at you with everything I've got."

Danny tensed. "Right..."

Which was definitely not something Danny wanted, despite the fact that he'd been curious as to how he held up against Dan, now that three years had passed. Noticing the odd silence, Dan glanced at Danny, intent on asking what the problem was, but Paulina returned with a tray in her hands.

"You boys better appreciate this! I can't remember the last time I brought up a tray to my own room!" She stopped short at the image on her bed.

Danny had apparently crawled into Ezra's lap, his arms wrapped around the larger boy's shoulders and his thighs on either side of Ezra's waist. A blush so deep a red it was practically purple covered Danny's horrified face as the ghostly hero stared back at Paulina dumbly. Ezra, whose own arms were loose around Danny's waist, was sitting up on the bed with his legs crossed, face unrepentant as he stared at Paulina. He didn't seem to mind Danny being on his lap, nor did he seem to mind his shocked audience.

"Well," Paulina finally said, "At least catching you boys like this makes up for the manual labor. What was that about not dating?" Danny finally seemed to come out of his catatonic state, but not before Paulina whipped out her phone and snapped a quick picture.

"Delete that!" he cried, shrilly.

"In your dreams, Ghost Boy!" she laughed, running away from Danny as he chased her around the room.

Neither of them noticed Dan's calculating gaze on Danny's back.

Sam sighed, picking at her vegan, gluten-free pizza listlessly. Beside her, Tucker tore into his meat-laden slice and Dash and Kwan distractedly munched on their own food. The news playing on the TV was still fawning over Danny Phantom's latest ghost fight—but Sam had a feeling that it wasn't Danny fighting Technus. The moves and taunts he used were clever, but not Danny's style. Knowing that Dan could take on Danny's form, Sam figured Dan had taken the mantle for a short while to show Danny how it was done, and she couldn't disagree with the results. Dan was a much more efficient fighter and he only spared time for the occasional insult or to glance smugly up at the sky. Dan was probably silently gloating at Danny that day.

Sam wondered how Danny had reacted after that fight. Despite whatever tension had been there the first day Dan had returned, Sam noticed that it had become virtually nonexistent in the last few days—especially after the weekend. Sam wondered if she was the

only one who saw it, but she was worried about Dan's intentions. She wasn't blind (well, no one was) to Dan's long, lingering looks at Danny or to the secret meaning behind Dan's smiles. There was something... *wrong* about the way Dan stared. It was possessive and lustful and Sam didn't think that Danny could see it. Danny was so intent on fixing Dan—the way he failed to fix Vlad—that he couldn't see that Dan didn't want a father/son relationship like Vlad wanted.

Dan was a sociopath—Sam knew what that meant. That meant Dan didn't care about other people's emotions, so long as he got what he wanted. Dan would lie, manipulate, steal, cheat, and even use force to get what he wanted.

And it seemed to Sam lately that Dan *wanted* Danny.

But Dan was obviously too smart to try to force himself on Danny; not only was Danny a strong ghost in his own right, Danny was fated to be the next Master of Time *and* he had the backing of the current Master, Clockwork. Danny had an entire network of former enemy ghosts who would quickly stand up to Dan to save Danny, not to mention the many human allies Danny had accrued. Obviously, Dan knew force would be pointless and he would end up erased. So, Dan had to use other methods.

Like shutting Danny's friends out.

Sam hated every second that they weren't talking to Danny, because it meant Danny was crawling deeper into the spider's web. But she couldn't forgive Danny's abrupt dismissal of them so easily—especially now that Danny had apparently decided that stuck-up, deep-as-the-world's-shallowest-puddle Paulina was better company.

But she knew that she would have to overcome her pride and talk to him, because Danny was still her friend and she still cared and there was *no way* she was going to let that *perverted monster* get his claws into Danny.

Sam bit her lip; she had hoped she and Danny would last forever. They seemed to be soul mates and once they began dating, Sam had no shame in admitting that she honestly started planning their wedding. But Danny had gotten restless and angry; he annoyed the hell out of her by spending all of his free time moping around her, then he would ignore her for weeks. Sam refused to take that and when sex couldn't solve their problems, they broke up. It destroyed Sam—to the point that she did something so stupid as trying to date someone else immediately after to sooth the pain. If the goth girl was being honest, part of it was also probably to pour some salt on Danny's wound, to make him see what he'd lost.

But then he got *Dan* , and Sam knew the time for games was over. The second the portal opened behind her, when she heard the rhythmic tick of clocks, Sam automatically knew whom Danny had gone to see. Sam knew Clockwork never called Danny for no reason, so she decided to break it off with...whatever his name was and be Danny's friend again because Sam knew Danny would need her.

"Sam?" Tucker asked gently, laying a hand on her shoulder. "You okay?"

"I just...I really don't trust Dan. I don't think anyone should go through being erased, but Dan is bad news, I just *feel* it."

Tucker sighed. "Sam...I know it doesn't seem like a smart idea to be friendly with the guy, but he *is* helping Danny. And I'm tired of ignoring him for the sake of pride. He's our best friend; haven't we made enough mistakes in the past, when we've taken his friendship for granted?"

Dash scowled. "He's taking *us* for granted! He should listen to us when we say Dan is only gonna use him! *We're* his friends, not that psycho-murderer!"

"But Dan does seem to be helpful..." Kwan offered weakly.

"I say we keep ignoring Danny until he sees sense and leaves that freak!" Dash replied, banging his hand on the table.

Sam frowned. "We've been ignoring him for a few days. It obviously isn't working."

"What about going to his parents?" Dash demanded quickly.

"They probably know all about Dan," Tucker said. "Danny doesn't like to keep secrets if he doesn't have to."

"But..." Sam muttered, "They probably don't know about Dan's weird behavior."

Tucker groaned. "This again? Dan's a sociopath; he doesn't know how to interact with people the normal way. He's *trying*, at least."

Kwan sighed, "Why don't we compromise?"

"How?" Dash snorted angrily.

"We can't get Dan away from Danny right now, right? So we stick around Danny and pretend we're okay with it and keep an eye out for him. Keep your enemies closer, right?" Kwan shrugged.

Sam smiled. "That's actually a really good idea, Kwan. It's obvious that keeping away from Danny is detrimental, so if we're near him, we can keep Dan from influencing all of Danny's decisions!"

Tucker rolled his eyes. "Whatever you guys say. I know I didn't think it was a hot idea at first, but now that he hasn't killed us all week, I'm willing to give the guy a chance."

"I really don't understand the change of heart, Foley," Dash sneered.

"I honestly haven't seen Danny so relaxed, is what it is," Tucker explained. "When was the last time you saw him so happy? He's been restless and angry lately and going to find random fights in the ghost zone was not helping. Whatever Dan is doing is helping Danny

a lot, obviously, and I'm not going to take away something that makes Danny happy."

Not when I owe so much to Danny , Tucker mused to himself.

"For now!" Sam argued, "Wait until Dan does... *whatever* it is he's *actually* planning! What will happen to Danny then?"

"What will *happen* ," Tucker said condescendingly, "is that Danny or Clockwork will erase Dan before he steps out of bounds. Maybe he can find a way around the collar, but Clockwork is omniscient."

"If you like the guy so much, why don't you marry him?" Dash muttered childishly.

"You know what?" Tucker stood, clearly exasperated, "When you guys feel like growing up and realizing that we're being shit friends to Danny, you give me a call. I ignored my best friend for a whole business week, trying to get all of you to see reason. It's not working, so I give up! *I'm gonna go find my best friend tomorrow and apologize. You can do whatever you want!*"

With a disgusted huff, Tucker shook his head and walked out of the pizza parlor, ignoring the eyes burning into his back. Sam turned back to Dash, a concerned frown marring her features. Dash glared mulishly at the table, arms crossed. Kwan bit his lip, looking between all of them, before he sighed and stood.

"I'm gonna go, too," he mumbled.

"Et tu, Kwan?" Dash glared.

"Even if I don't agree with Tucker about Dan, I don't think it's a good idea to leave Danny alone with him. If that means pretending to be friendly to a murderer, I think Danny deserves that dedication, with all that he's had to sacrifice for us. Not to mention, we were pretty terrible to him back in freshman year; I guess I can think of this as trying to make it up to him."

The Korean boy nodded at them and walked out, not once glancing back.

Sam and Dash sighed, now that they were alone.

"I think Kwan is right...his plan is much better and it doesn't alienate Danny. It also gives Dan a chance to redeem himself. I know what my instincts are saying, but Tucker's right; Dan isn't built like the rest of us and his means of showing affection are likely warped and unnatural to us."

Dash groaned. "I really don't trust that guy. I just *know* he's got something terrible planned."

Sam placed a comforting hand on Dash's. "Yeah, I agree. But *Danny's* safety is most important, and that means we gotta make a few sacrifices of our own."

Dash nodded. "Yeah, you're right. C'mon. We better let Tucker and Kwan know we're in on their plan."

The goth girl smiled encouragingly at Dash and, together, they walked out of the parlor. Invisible red eyes narrowed at their backs as they left, and the clone resolved to return to his original, now that his mission was done.

"So, will you help us, Papi?" Paulina smiled her sweetest smile to her, admittedly, confused-looking father.

"...Que?"

Dan and Danny glanced at each other; Dan was slightly amused and Danny was steadily growing more nervous. Paulina, for her part, was looking frustrated.

" *Ay, papi! Ya te lo expliqué!* "

"If I may," Dan interjected smoothly. "I understand it's hard to grasp, Mr. Sanchez. Not to mention, we're asking a huge favor of you and your reputation. You see...Danny and I are in love."

Without flinching, Dan pulled Danny to him roughly, ignoring the slowly growing look of horror on the hafla's face.

"But Danny's parents would never accept that—and could you imagine the press if they were to catch wind of Danny's sexual orientation? It would be awful for Danny."

Mr. Sanchez nodded sagely. "Yes, I see your point."

"So, Danny's parents will eventually find out about Danny and I sneaking out to be together. We will tell them that Danny has been sneaking out to see Paulina—because you do not approve—and that we've been lying to you and telling you that we're training and Paulina is helping us. We will tell Danny's parents that I am there to help with the ruse. If they come asking you about more information, we ask that you tell them that Paulina is helping Danny train, but that is all, because you would never allow Paulina to date Danny because of his dangerous lifestyle."

The Latino father nodded again. "I am beginning to understand. You and Daniel will be seeing each other, and my daughter will provide Danny's....how you say...beard."

"Yes, exactly," Dan smiled.

"Daniel, if this is true, why did you pursue my daughter for so many years?" the burly man raised a brow.

Danny gulped. "I-I thought it would be what my parents wanted. I wanted to make them proud of me, but in the end, I could only ever see Paulina as a friend. When Ezra came, I couldn't deny who I really was anymore."

Each line was mechanic and obviously false, to Dan's annoyance, but Paulina's father was eating it up. Manly tears shone in the proud father's eyes; without warning, Danny was ripped from Dan and suffocated in Mr. Sanchez's embrace.

"You will be like a son to me, Daniel Fenton!" he declared. "I will help you, because I truly believe in love! If you were able to soften my Pau into becoming the beautiful, considerate woman she is today with your friendship, then I have no shame in calling you my son and ensuring your happiness with your boyfriend!"

As Dan tried willfully not to laugh aloud, Danny wondered who he had pissed off lately to be in this predicament.

More than that, Danny wondered why the thought of calling Dan his "boyfriend" wasn't as repulsive as he thought it would be. Later, when the three teens were upstairs planning how to "get caught" sneaking out at the Fenton home, Danny remained pensive. He'd never been one to lie to himself for long, after all. Were these feelings a machination of Dan's—a part of Dan ensuring his own survival and a side effect of Dan's sociopathic means?

Or was Danny really feeling certain... *emotions* ...for his other self?

As the night wore on and Dan and Paulina slipped into easy banter, neither of them noticed Danny's calculating gaze on Dan's back.

And so time marches on ...

Awesome. I literally wrote this chapter in a few weeks, which is the fastest I've been able to do that since *Bromance*. And it was of satisfying length. I hope you guys enjoyed this chapter!

World

To my (I assume) one, very rude reviewer:

Just be patient. If you can't, fuck right on off. And when you get there, fuck off again.

To my other, very kind reveiwers:

Thank you. I thoroughly appreciate the support and I hope this chapter was worth the wait.

Also, if you love me and this story, please don't support Jem the Movie. It's an atrocity and Jem fans shouldn't put up with it. Come join us for Jemboree instead! If you want more info on that, feel free to PM me.

Tucker and Kwan had resolved to talk to Danny the next day, but Sam couldn't wait; which was how she found herself ringing the doorbell to the Fenton home that evening. Anticipation kept her on her toes, literally, as she waited for a reply. She half-hoped that Danny himself would answer the door—that he realized how shallow Paulina was and returned early.

When Maddie opened the door and looked bemused at Sam's presence, that hope quickly died.

"Danny isn't home, is he?" she asked dejectedly.

"No, sweetie," Maddie affirmed. "I thought he and Dan were out training with you?"

Sam's lips thinned. She knew the plan was to not instigate anything. She knew she should be giving Dan a chance, because it wasn't fair for Dan to die without any say in the matter. But Sam thought of the lascivious looks Dan had been giving Danny; she thought of how

Dan had so quickly and effectively separated Danny from the people who loved him and fooled the ones Dan couldn't alienate into believing Dan truly wanted to change; she thought about how Danny seemed to need her less and less.

"He...he hasn't trained with us for days. Not since he started training with Dan."

Maddie frowned. "So, he only trains with Dan? Why is he not training with you anymore?"

"Because Dan is up to something," Sam sighed. "And he's manipulated Danny into believing him over us."

"Oh, Sam," Maddie smiled sadly, "I understand how shocking this all is and, sometimes, I don't want to believe it. But, Danny's old enough and mature enough to know what he wants out of life and if Dan can help him, then we should accept him. Besides, Dan is not responsible for the way he came to be and he is taking responsibility for the atrocities he's committed. We ought to forgive him and move forward."

Sam gaped. Was Danny's entire family so taken in? Was Dan so easily able to fool everyone into believing he cared about Danny? Her hands clenched.

"He and Danny sneak out at night. They're not even training right now. They're at Paulina's house."

Maddie stared. "What do you mean, Samantha?"

Sam flinched, the saccharine tone not fooling her; but she needed to press on, for Danny's sake.

"Danny and Dan...they do all their training at night somewhere secret. They sneak out all the time. When you think they're training with us, they just go and hang out somewhere or fly around and talk.

I think Dan is planning something, because he's convinced Danny to not hang out with us anymore at all."

"Sam," Maddie replied, eerily calm, "I believe you'd best come in and tell me everything."

Sam swallowed and nodded as she stepped through the threshold. She wouldn't reveal her fears about Dan's odd looks; it seemed Maddie was fond of Dan and Sam wouldn't be the one to ruin that. But she could discourage their excursions and that would limit Dan's influence. She fortified herself, knowing this was the best way to protect Danny.

Even if it meant Danny would be angry with her.

"So now that my *papi* has agreed, you guys are free to train. What do you two even do together?" Paulina cocked her head, reclining back against her pillows. The two boys at her feet glanced at each other, and it was obvious to Paulina that they were hiding something from her—so she kicked Danny.

"Ow, geez!" he whined, rubbing his knee.

"What are you two hiding from me?" she asked, then waved her phone with an evil smile, "Or should this little gem I've acquired show up on the internet?"

"You wouldn't dare," Danny paled.

"Try me."

Dan grinned. "I don't have an issue with this."

"Of course *you* don't," Paulina scoffed, "You're trying to get in Danny's pants. Starting up a rumor that you two are dating would probably work in your favor."

Danny flushed and pouted. "Don't put that picture anywhere near facebook."

Paulina grinned at Danny. "What are you hiding, then?"

Dan rolled his eyes. "As much as she's helping us, she deserves to know as well, Danny. It may well be that Paulina is going to be our only real friend in this, next to Jazz."

Danny frowned, turning earnest eyes onto Paulina. "Promise me you won't stop being our friend after you hear us out."

Paulina nodded slowly, her expression sobering. "Of course I promise, Danny."

Danny smiled shakily at her and then turned to his counterpart with a meaningful gaze. Dan glanced back, sighed, and stood from the bed. The pale skin and green eyes bled into blue flesh and red irises; the youthful visage morphed into something older and more sinister; flames erupted from his scalp, wisping away the ebony hair. In seconds, Dan stood in "Ezra's" place, calmly looking at a shocked Paulina.

"W-What *are* you?" she gasped, hand clutching at her chest.

With a deep exhale to steady his nerves, Danny told Paulina the whole story. He told her about his cheating; Dan's creation; their first fight; Clockwork's proposal; Dan's instruction; their introduction to the denizens of hell; their nightly training; and Danny's other friends' disapproval.

Paulina sat quietly for a moment, glancing between the two ghosts. Finally, she spoke.

"Can I talk to Ezra alone?"

Danny startled and looked to Dan for guidance; once Dan nodded, Danny sighed and turned intangible, resigning himself to spending

time with Paulina's dad as he phased through the floor. Once they were alone, Paulina turned murderous eyes on Dan.

"What the *hell* is *wrong* with you?" she whispered fiercely, "Hitting on your *younger self from an alternate dimension* ?!"

Dan pouted. "Did you miss how he was hitting on *me* ?"

"He's confused! He doesn't know what he's doing because... because...ugh! Just because!"

"That was articulate," Dan replied snidely.

"What *ever* !" the Latina growled, throwing a pillow at him, "It's still wrong and I'm not gonna let you do this to Danny!"

Dan huffed, catching the pillow, then started looking around the room expectantly. Paulina glared at him for a few silent moments until her curiosity overcame her righteous anger.

"What are you looking for, Ezra?"

"Usually," Dan sneered, "this is the part where Clockwork pops out and reassures you that this is all in the plan and that I'm not just a sick fuck."

"You're a sick fuck for agreeing, if that's true!"

Dan rolled his eyes. "I guess I'll just have to convince you."

Paulina raised a skeptical eyebrow. "Pray, tell how you will accomplish that feat?"

"Danny's not stupid, is he?"

Paulina shook her head no.

"So, theoretically, Danny would know when someone were hitting on him as obviously as I am, wouldn't he?"

A hesitant nod.

"Which means...?" Dan grinned maniacally as Paulina's shoulders slumped in mute defeat. "Which means...maybe subconsciously, Danny knows what I'm doing and he's not acknowledging it, because he's probably in denial? And maybe he's not freaking out because he secretly wants me?"

"But that's...that's so wrong..."

Dan sat beside Paulina, something inside him quieting when Paulina didn't recoil in fear. "Why?"

"You're practically related, you're half crazy fruitloop, and you're ten years older than him!"

"I'm also the only one in the whole world who accepts him as he is."

Paulina pouted. "I accept him as he is, you jerk."

"You think you do," Dan countered, reclining in the bed, "But no one accepts him. You see him as a hero; you enjoy that he saves people and you think he's a kind, decent person. You don't know how petty he really is, or how angry he can get, or how often he wants to get even."

"Everyone feels like that sometimes."

"Yeah, but somewhere deep in your mind, you can't allow *Danny* to act like other people. When he's Danny Phantom, you can't imagine him being like everyone else. He's somehow above others and all of you put him on this pedestal he can't possibly live up to."

"And you don't?" Paulina asked, tilting her head.

"I don't," Dan affirmed, "Mostly because, as you so helpfully pointed out, part of him formed me. So I know Danny quite intimately. But, also because I'm an asshole and I really don't care about other people and their feelings—"

"Sociopath," Paulina interjected.

"—so I can relate. When Danny is petty and angry and an all-around asshole, I revel in it. To me, the hero side and the asshole and the scared child and the martyr are all Danny. And I can accept that all those people exist within him as one person; I don't separate them like other people do." Dan hummed. "This is hard to explain."

The Latina looked pensive. "No, I think I get it. When we think of Danny in a certain mood, we think of that mood as a whole other person rather than thinking that mood of Danny is just Danny. So, whenever he seems brave or heroic or self-sacrificing, we don't think Danny *Fenton*, we think Danny *Phantom*."

Dan smirked. "Exactly. And when he's vindictive and vengeful, you somehow think he's not being any sort of Danny Fenton or Phantom that you recognize and..."

"...and we think he's not acting like himself," Paulina sighed.

"Somehow, *that* Danny isn't *really* Danny; he's another person pretending to be Danny. Because of his alter ego, other people can't really accept a Danny that isn't fulltime Danny Phantom. But I accept that when Danny is being a dick, he's just being Danny. And you should know how much it sucks to be surrounded by people that don't know and appreciate the real you."

Paulina glanced at her bookcase, acutely aware of how, just two years ago, she was desperately afraid of any person in the popular crowd knowing her secret.

"Now, that blonde chick you hang around accepts you; Danny and I accept you; your family accepts you. Would you deny Danny someone who accepts him?"

With a long-suffering sigh, Paulina shook her head. "I could never do that to Danny. And...And Danny accepts you, right?"

Dan's face was unreadable. "Of course."

"Fine. I'll help you, I guess. But you better not hurt him!" she jumped up and held her nails threateningly close to his face. "Or these nails are gonna have a red overcoat, if you catch my drift."

Thoroughly amused, Dan held up the pillow in a placating manner. "Yes'm."

"You better. So, what's your real name, if not Ezra?"

Dan smirked self-deprecatingly. "Dan."

Paulina's nose wrinkled. "How unoriginal. I like Ezra better."

"At least I didn't pick something lame like 'Dark Danny.'"

They burst out laughing, and Paulina clutched her sides in humored agony. "Oh, *dios mio* ! That would've been awful!"

Dan snickered. "I probably would've just allowed myself to be erased if any part of me would've considered that name."

Paulina rolled her eyes. "I would've done the same. So, let's go get Danny. He's probably being smothered by my papi and I'm sure he needs saving."

Paulina heaved herself off the bed and trekked to the door, until Dan's hand on her shoulder stopped her. Bemused, she turned to look at him and was surprised at the somber expression looking back at her. Dan's mouth worked, but no sounds came out. Finally, the older ghost huffed and crossed his arms.

"Ezra?"

"Thank you."

"For...?"

"I guess...you're the only friend I've made on my own. And you're the only person to accept me and what I'm doing without Clockwork having to step in. I...yeah."

The Latina smiled and patted his shoulder.

"You're not a bad person, Ezra. People tell you that you are and you play the role, but you're not bad when you don't want to be. There's more to us than the way we were born. Besides, you act like being a sociopath is a bad thing."

"Maybe you're giving me too much credit," Dan replied as he changed back into 'Ezra'.

"Maybe you're giving yourself too little," Paulina shrugged. "It's a fact that all of us are a little sociopathic; the people who are just a little more so than others tend to become the Senators and CEOs of the world. Maybe you're a little farther on the spectrum, but that doesn't mean that you're only a sociopath. Just like there's more than one side to Danny, there's more than one side to you. The sooner you accept it, the sooner you'll bag Danny."

Dan frowned. "I still enjoy killing people."

She shrugged. "I still enjoy crushing other girls' confidence with my beauty. It doesn't make us bad people; we just revel in our imperfection."

"Revel, huh?" Dan smirked. "Even if that imperfection is that we're narcissistic to the point of wanting an alternate reality of ourselves?"

"Hey, if I had the chance to hit on myself, I would do it," she laughed. "It's really not all that weird now that you've explained it. I know no one will love me as much as I love me; I don't see why that's any different for you."

Dan frowned. "I'm not capable of love."

"Are you capable of hate?"

The older ghost gave her a deadpan expression in response.

"Then you're capable of love; if you don't know what something isn't, how can you know what something is? If you don't know what love is, how can you feel hate? You're a sociopath, Ezra, not a corpse."

She winked at him over her shoulder, then, with a flick of her long hair, sauntered out of her room. Dan stared after her. His hand clenched as he realized that, for the first time in a long while, someone didn't try to explain away his sociopathy; she accepted everything that people thought made him a monster and was fearless enough to threaten him; she didn't recoil even when she thought he was doing something wrong. Maybe she even thought he was human.

"Ezra!" Danny's voice came from downstairs, startling Dan out of his reverie and reminding him of his purpose in this timeline. Taking a deep breath, Dan shook himself and descended, resolving to not waver from his course.

If he intended to survive, he couldn't afford to.

"Coming!" he shouted back.

"What did you and Paulina talk about?" Danny asked as they flew leisurely back home.

"She warned me not to hurt you," Dan replied quietly.

Danny frowned at his companion; since the older ghost had talked to Paulina, he'd been noticeably more subdued. It worried Danny that whatever Paulina said had this much of an effect on Dan.

"Why would she say that?" he eventually prompted.

"Who knows?" Dan evaded; Danny pursed his lips as they phased into the house; his mother was in the sitting room where they materialized, and Danny realized he wouldn't be able to further question Dan with her around, judging by her expression.

"Where have you two boys been?" Maddie asked, disapproval coloring her tone.

Both ghosts' brows furrowed as they glanced at each other in confusion.

"We were training, like usual," Danny replied.

"And how long do the two of you plan on lying to me?" she said shortly.

Dan's eyes scanned around the room, noticing the two mugs on the coffee table—one of them with purple, lip-shaped marks.

"Sam," he deduced, and Maddie looked at him in surprise. Danny's hands fisted, though his face remained impassive.

"What did Sam tell you, mom?" he asked evenly.

Maddie collected herself. "She told me that you two don't train during the day when you go out; that you're training at night somewhere secret. She told me Dan is convincing you to exclude your friends and that..." she glanced at Dan hesitantly, "that Dan is plotting something, but she doesn't know what."

Danny's eyes were a wrathful green. Amusing though the sight was, Dan knew that he needed to play the part of mediator—if only to further discredit Sam.

"Danny," he said, faux-sympathetic, a hand landing gently on Danny's shoulder, "Sam is just worried about you. She's just being your friend. Let's all calm down and tell your mom the truth." A

squeeze and two pats to Danny's back, and the halfa looked at Dan with understanding.

"Yeah, okay. Let's tell her the truth."

Maddie frowned. "What truth?"

Danny sighed. "Dan and I are training during the day, but Dan decided to give me a break every other day because of how hard I've been training. He thinks I should spend some time living as well as training, so that's why it looks like I've been goofing off. As for why we don't include the others, it's because we move around so much and it gets dangerous; I don't exactly pay attention to where I'm shooting ectoblasts when I train with Dan, after all."

The redheaded woman seemed to accept this. "And the midnight excursions?"

Danny sighed and glanced away. "I...Dan and I say we're training, but the truth is we're meeting someone."

"Who could you possibly be meeting at that time?"

"Paulina Sanchez."

Maddie blinked. "Who?"

Dan sighed melodramatically. "Danny and Paulina are seeing each other behind her dad's back. We told Sam and the others that we were training, because Sam doesn't like Paulina and so that there's no chance of her going to talk to Paulina's dad, like she did with you."

"Why are you sneaking around with Paulina, Danny?" Maddie asked, arms akimbo.

"Because her dad wouldn't approve; he says my life is too dangerous and she can't date me. But we really like each other, so we've been meeting at night. Dan comes with me so we can tell

everyone we're training and then he makes himself look like Paulina and stays in Paulina's place while she and I are out."

Dan smirked at Danny, impressed with Danny's improvisation on the only weak part of their story; Danny returned the look with a shy smile.

"Danny, I'm disappointed that you thought you needed to lie to me," the woman sighed, "but I understand that you probably feel like you can take care of everything on your own. Dan, I hoped you would be more mature and implore Danny to be honest with us, but I understand that you're only now really maturing. I guess I can forgive both of you, but you're both grounded for a week for this. No sneaking out!"

Both boys nodded at her fierce look, humbly keeping their heads down. After a beat, Maddie smiled and hugged both of them.

"On the other hand, I'm proud of you two. Just a few days ago, you could barely stand each other, and now look how close you are! You're practically brothers!" She didn't notice the way they both winced. "I'm glad you two are looking out for each other, but don't neglect your friends, Danny. They've always been there for you."

Danny sighed and nodded. "I know, mom."

Dan scoffed. "I bet Sam didn't tell you the other reason why we didn't invite them to train."

Maddie backed away a step, leveling her gaze on Dan. "What other reason?"

The halfa rolled his eyes. "Figures. Sam, Dash, Tucker, and Kwan were all unwilling to give Dan a chance. I asked them to trust me to rehabilitate Dan. They said no. They haven't once apologized since then, even though Dan has done nothing but prove he's becoming a better person. Even Paulina likes him!"

"That doesn't sound like Sam and Tucker," Maddie said, cocking her head curiously.

Dan shrugged. "I personally think Tucker is warming up to me. He's made an effort to talk to me when the others weren't around."

Maddie smiled again. "Well, thank you for being honest with me, boys. That doesn't mean you're any less grounded. Now, march!" she pointed upstairs and, with a groan, both ghosts followed her orders. Once safely within Danny's room, they grinned conspiratorially at each other.

"I can't believe she bought that!" Danny whispered. "You're a genius!"

"You're the one who came up with that lie about me changing into Paulina," Dan smirked, poking Danny's forehead playfully. "Who knew you had it in you?"

Danny smiled. " *You* did."

Dan chuckled, "Yeah, I guess I did. Are we going to Grim Castle tonight?"

Danny flopped back onto his bed with a sigh. "I don't know. Mom will definitely check on us in the middle of the night."

"Then maybe it's time we put the fruits of your labor to the test."

Danny glanced at Dan. "How do you mean?"

"How long can you maintain your copy now?"

The halfa's brow furrowed. "I...I don't know. My max was about two hours. Why?"

"I bet you can keep it for four times that now," Dan smirked. "Or did you think Minnie and Junior were kicking your ass for the fun of it?"

"I kind of did, yeah," Danny laughed. "All right, let's do this."

Danny closed his eyes and concentrated the way he always did when he separated; another Danny pulled himself out of the original, and they both blinked at each other as Dan looked on, amusement clear on the older ghost's face.

"That...did not take as much energy as it used to," Danny marveled. The copy smiled at him and shrugged.

"Guess we got stronger."

The copy disappeared with a wave of Danny's hand and the halfa turned excited eyes to his older counterpart. "That's awesome! Is that why you've been working me so hard?"

Dan sat beside Danny and nodded. "It takes a lot of stamina to be the master of time. The reason Clockwork picked me to train you was likely because I have stamina in spades and I can train you to match mine."

"Why don't you ever train me yourself?" Danny asked, reclining on the bed.

Dan huffed. "How do you feel about me?"

The halfa's cheeks flushed crimson; he discreetly glanced over at Dan, but the man seemed distracted and wasn't pay attention to Danny. Somewhat relieved, Danny shifted until he was facing away from Dan, and he tried to gather himself. "I think you and I are becoming friends."

"Do you trust me?"

Danny felt his stomach drop. The truth was that, despite Dan's many crimes and his attitude, Danny felt as though he could truly trust and tell anything to Dan. Dan listened and never judged him; Dan was funny and witty; and Dan was starting to become a little too

attractive. Danny couldn't ever remember feeling confused about his sexuality. He'd always liked and pursued girls and, to an extent, that was still the same. Dan was the only exception to that rule, which was why Danny was hesitant to consider those emotions. How much of what he was feeling a machination of Dan's? How much of it was Danny's real feelings? Danny wouldn't put it past his other self to manipulate Danny into *needing* Dan emotionally.

But, Danny thought as he looked at the shadows cast by Dan's flaming hair, there was definitely something sincere about Dan lately. Even if Dan was plotting something, Dan was exposing too much of himself in the process for this to be all just part of some plan to trick Danny into letting Dan exist.

"I want to," he eventually said. "I'm starting to."

Dan nodded. "If I attacked you with everything I had, would you still trust me?"

"Actually," Danny said after a pause, "I almost opened your thermos before Clockwork did." Danny turned back around to see Dan staring at him. "I wanted to see how I would do against you now. I've been so *bored*, Dan; I thought fighting you might be the challenge I was looking for. I'm glad Clockwork released you himself, though. I prefer having you as a teacher than an enemy."

Danny sat up. "Would you have killed me if I'd opened the thermos before Clockwork?"

Dan's red gaze bore into Danny's own blue eyes. "Yes. I would have tried to."

"Would you have succeeded?"

Dan smirked. "You're pretty clever, Danny boy. I'm sure you would've put up one helluva fight."

Danny chuckled. "Thanks. So, what should we do for the next two hours? We've still got some time until we're expected at the Castle Grim."

Dan shrugged. "Let's take a nap. I'm damn tired with all this running around we're doing. And, since you're so keen," the older ghost grinned, "I'll be testing you myself tonight. You'll be getting your wish, so you'll need your rest."

Danny's eyes widened and a smirk spread across his face. "All right, old man. Don't say I didn't warn you."

"Shut up, brat!" Dan said, tossing a pillow at Danny. "Go to sleep, already!"

Danny snatched the pillow out of the air with a laugh. He stuffed it under his head and laid down, turning away from Dan. Just as he began to slip into an easy unconsciousness, the other side of the bed creaked with added weight. He sat up and turned around, surprised to see Dan lying on his side, facing away from Danny.

"What are you doing?"

"Taking a nap."

"On my bed?"

"Primal urges."

"You're so weird."

"You're going to regret all this talking when I beat your ass."

Danny flushed and lay back down. "Whatever."

"Dan 1; Danny 0."

"Shut up, old man!"

" *Boys!* " Maddie's voice bellowed from downstairs. "You better be in bed already!"

Danny put a hand over his mouth to keep from laughing; behind him, he could feel Dan's shoulders shaking. It was unfortunate, Danny thought, that they wouldn't be getting any rest before they went to the Castle tonight.

" *Danny* ."

Danny groaned quietly and opened his eyes. He glanced around the dark room and found two shining red eyes staring at him.

"What time is it?" he whispered.

"Almost midnight. Make your clone."

Danny nodded tiredly and stretched. With barely a thought, another Danny pulled himself free from the original and stretched as well. Danny grinned as he turned into a ghost and floated in the air. "We'd better not keep Minnie and Junior waiting. You know how Mandy gets when we're late."

Dan shuddered. "Yeah, let's go already." His eyes closed briefly and a Dan copy emerged as well. The copy and original nodded to each other and Dan waved a finger in warning. "Don't you two talk about us."

With that, both original ghosts flew out of the house, invisible and intangible. With a quick peek at the Infi-Map, Danny led them to the nearest opening ghost portal and to Clockwork's domain. Without even glancing away from the time portals, Clockwork waved a hand behind him and both ghosts, well used to the routine, flew into the opening to hell.

In short order, they arrived in the hall of the Castle Grim, where Mandy waited for them, arms crossed.

"You're late," she said, deadpan.

"Sorry, we decided to take a small nap," Danny replied.

Mandy stared them down for a few seconds. "...Together?"

"We're becoming close," Dan shrugged. "Exceedingly."

Danny flushed and opened his mouth to retort; only his finely tuned sense of self-preservation helped him dodge the bullet that suddenly whizzed by his head. He stared in shock at the crack in the floor where the bullet hole was, then turned back to a stone-faced Mandy, who held a machine gun—and it was pointed at him.

"What the hell...?"

"Don't lower your guard, Danny boy!" Dan snarled, an ectoblast forming in his hand. Seconds later, it was hurtling at Danny, who barely dodged it.

"Your task for tonight, Daniel," Mandy twirled her gun around before pointing it at the halfa's head again. "Survive the night. Everyone in this castle is out to get you. We've already begun."

She fired a volley of bullets at the younger ghost who smirked and turned intangible. The bullets flew through him painlessly. It didn't faze Mandy, though, who kept firing; seconds later, Danny realized she was merely the distraction. Dan's large hand—also intangible—grabbed Danny by his hair and threw him through the ceiling. Danny slammed into the ceiling of the next room and fell to the ground, coughing. He hauled himself up and came face to face with Minnie. She smiled kindly at him—which, Danny thought, was completely at odds with the bow and arrow she was pointing at his face.

"Hello, dearest friend, it is regretful. I am afraid I must attack you now. Flee from me, Danny, that I ne'er catch you," she sang, and the hand on the arrow extended further.

With a curse, Danny flung himself away from her, barely dodging the expertly shot arrow. A low growl behind him and Danny turned with a shield erected—just barely stopping the pointed tendril Junior had just thrust at Danny.

"Sorry, Danny," Junior frowned. "Mom says this is the only way to help you. So we've got to attack you with everything we've got!" Junior's nergal encompassed his whole body, and the young boy launched a herculean attack at Danny. Danny, for his part, countered with ectoblasts, dodges, and even a ghostly wail.

"Fuck," Danny muttered as he escaped the Grim children by phasing through the house to the other wing, "This might be a little hard."

A deep chuckle startled him, putting him on high alert.

"Dat's kind of de point, Danny," Grim smiled as he melted from the darkness, scythe held high. "I suggest you run."

"Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, *fuck!* "

Hours later found Danny passed out on Grim's throne, Dan and the Grim family surrounding him. After six grueling hours of dodging, frantic attacks, and scare tactics, Danny had finally given into exhaustion—midair. Dan had barely caught the halfa before the boy crashed to the ground and had laid Danny gingerly in the larger throne. The royalty of hell had gathered around the two ghosts shortly after.

"I believe he did well. What do ye tink, Mandy?" Grim asked, allowing his scythe to warp to its resting place.

Mandy threw her smoking gun onto her own throne. "It was passable."

Dan rolled his eyes. "He did pretty good, considering who he was up against."

"Dearest Phantom fought to his upmost best!" Minnie declared proudly.

"Yeah! I can't believe I got to fight with Danny Phantom! That ghostly wail thing was killer!" Junior said, excitedly jumping around.

"I better take Danny home, then." Dan sighed and picked up the boy again, cradling him close to his chest. "We still have to go to school and everything, after all. His mother doesn't know we're here."

"She found out about us?" Mandy asked.

"No, but she has grounded Danny for sneaking out. I'll explain later." With a nod to all of them, Dan floated up into the portal that was waiting for him. In a flash, he appeared in Danny's room. To his surprise, his own clone and Danny's clone were in the bed, sleeping soundly, in each other's arms. With a huff, he kicked his own clone awake, who glared at him moodily.

"What the hell is this?" Dan demanded.

The clone smirked. "Don't be jealous just because I work fast."

"Yeah, okay," Dan snorted. "When did you sneak into the bed?"

"After his mother checked on him a third time," the clone finally admitted. "He was pretty quick to jump in my arms, though."

"So everything is moving smoothly," Dan surmised. "Good."

"As smoothly as it can with that fruitloop back on his way," the copy said carelessly, to Dan's chagrin.

"Shut up, will you?" Dan muttered. "We don't need him hearing."

The other Dan shrugged. "What are we doing with Danny's clone?"

Dan laid the original Danny Phantom beside the copy and waited instead of replying. Both ghosts watched as the halfa reverted to his

human self and, in a flash, the copy disappeared. Dan looked expectantly at the copy of himself; the duplicate rolled his eyes but obediently disappeared. With a shake of his head, Dan wondered why his copies were always so headstrong.

His attention turned back to his younger counterpart; Danny had done exceedingly well this round. Dan had only expected Danny to last four hours, but Danny was nothing if not tenacious. The fact that Danny was able to almost double what Dan expected of the boy meant that whatever training they were doing now was only going to hinder Danny if they continued. Dan would have to go to Clockwork and talk about what was next on the agenda so that Danny could move forward. By what Clockwork said, Dan recalled as he took a seat in midair, the Observers would be informing Clockwork of their choice for master of time in about two weeks. By his own calculations, Dan estimated that Vlad would be arriving in half a year. That gave them more than enough time for Danny to be trained to beat Vlad, but there was no guarantee that Danny would've been trained enough as master of time.

Dan couldn't decide who the greater threat was at this point; true, Vlad was dangerous, especially if he was as crazy as Dan imagined he was, but Walker becoming master of time instead of Danny meant that Dan's fate was absolutely sealed.

There was also the slow progression of their relationship. Though Danny was seemingly warming to the idea, Dan knew he couldn't push it too quickly. Danny needed to trust and believe that Dan was his best friend—and, while Danny was definitely more open and trusting of Dan, Dan could tell Danny was suspicious of his own feelings. Unless Danny was fully willing to trust in Dan, their relationship couldn't become anything near romantic.

Perhaps the most frustrating part was that Dan was starting to *crave* the closeness that came from a physical relationship. Though Danny clearly wasn't ready to accept his (very obvious, Dan thought with a roll of his eyes) growing attraction to Dan, Dan's touches lately were more... *familiar* . He was already conspicuous with his intentions,

and, judging from what his earlier clone had reported, Sam was very aware of Dan's endgame. He needed to be wary of Sam's emotional outbursts, because she could ruin everything. Dash was equally bothersome, but at least the idiot would confront Dan first. He could trust Tucker, which was handy—Danny tended to listen to Tucker more than Sam after all; and having that bleeding-heart Kwan at least willing to support Dan if it meant supporting Danny was similarly helpful.

"Goddamn annoying," Dan muttered to himself, especially since there was someone who liked him already—someone he didn't have to manipulate and trick into wanting to be with him. Someone who would've given him a chance, Dan thought with a sigh.

"Dangerous thinking there, Dan," a familiar voice whispered.

Dan merely flicked his eyes towards Clockwork. The master of time was in his adult form for the first time since his grand announcement.

"What's the special occasion, old man?" Dan asked listlessly.

Clockwork snorted. "The Observers. They're going to notice today that I've let you free, so I need to look..."

"Not weak?" Dan suggested.

Clockwork agreed with a shrug. "Are you having second thoughts, Dan? About Danny?"

Both full ghosts turned to look at Danny, who was still sleeping soundly. Exhaustion had made the normally alert boy dead to the world. Dan sighed, irritation lining every tense muscle of his body. Clockwork was right—just as he'd thought before, he couldn't stray from the path before him, or he wouldn't survive.

"No, Clockwork," Dan eventually replied. "I know where my place is."

"This isn't a matter of where your place is, Dan," Clockwork muttered, sympathy almost lining his words, "It's a matter of where you feel you belong."

Dan turned to Clockwork, but the ghost was gone already, leaving Dan alone to his thoughts and the sleeping half ghost. A small groan escaped him as Dan realized Clockwork was going to be a dick and let him figure this out on his own. Red eyes rested on the sleeping boy again, pensive.

"Dan..." Danny muttered in his sleep, surprising said ghost.

"Yes?" he whispered back, wondering if Danny would answer.

"Stop hogging the goddamn popcorn. It's supposed to be for two, you sadistic ass," Danny cursed lightly, startling a laugh out of Dan. A rare smile crossed the other ghost's face and he shrugged, lying down in midair, resolve restored.

"Whatever you say, Danny. Whatever you say."

"Boys! You're going to be late!" Maddie's voice called, rousing Danny from sleep.

"Ugh. Why does the morning have to exist?" Danny muttered.

Hovering above him, Dan smirked. "Just to piss you off."

"Why are you in my room?"

"I'm always in your room. Where do you think I sleep?"

Danny groaned as he turned around, glaring at Dan without any heat. "I figured you didn't sleep."

"Well, that is true," Dan conceded.

"You're such a creeper," Danny said, resigned, as he climbed out of bed. Dan shrugged in reply, phasing through the floor to the kitchen. Exhausted, Danny stumbled to the bathroom to wake himself up with a shower. Hot water pelted Danny mercilessly, but the halfa was dead on his feet. Still, a tired smile managed to find its way on his face when he heard Dan shouting up at him to not take all the hot water again.

In fact, Danny realized, his showers were the few times of day that Danny was completely alone; primal urges or not, Dan seemed to understand that there were times Danny definitely needed some space.

And space, Danny figured, was something he needed desperately right now in order to figure out his jumbled thoughts. Even being around Paulina, his school-boy fantasy, hadn't kept Danny from focusing completely on Dan. The entire conversation Danny had with Mr. Sanchez was a blur; Danny's thoughts were completely occupied with what Dan and Paulina could be talking about. Though he would never admit it, Danny was partially worried Dan and Paulina weren't talking, but partaking in other... *activities* .

They weren't loud, so they couldn't have been arguing (Paulina didn't know the meaning of "quiet"). But what did Paulina have that Danny didn't? Sure, Paulina was pretty and smart and had a vagina, but so what? Danny was Dan's *other half* ; they completed each other in a way no other human being could ever imitate.

Except Vlad , a traitorous voice in his head whispered.

Vlad, Danny reminded the voice, was long gone and he wasn't coming back. Vlad was universally hated by the human and ghost population of the world and he wouldn't risk coming back. Besides, even if Vlad came back now, Vlad wasn't a threat to what he and Dan had formed. No one was a threat to what they'd formed; and if Vlad wasn't an issue, then neither was Paulina. They belonged to each other—no one else.

Danny startled, embarrassed at his thoughts. He sighed thankfully; it was a good thing no one could hear his thoughts—not even Clockwork. Deciding he'd spent enough time thinking, he grabbed the soap and washed his chest. He followed through the motions of washing himself until he glanced down. *Shit*, Danny thought.

He was hard.

"That's an interesting reaction," Clockwork commented, staring disinterestedly at Danny's erection.

Predictably, Danny screamed and covered himself up. Clockwork looked mildly amused as Danny rushed to find a towel and preserve his purity. After Danny managed to wrap a towel around his waist, he noticed that the water had stopped and no one had rushed upstairs once they heard him scream.

"Did you freeze time?" Danny asked.

Clockwork gave him a look that reminded him of how pointless the question was. "I needed to speak with you privately, but if I get too close to Dan, he can sense me even before I freeze time."

"He's that strong?"

"He's that paranoid," the Master of Time rolled his eyes. "So glossing over the fact that you apparently find Dan sexually attractive..."

Danny's cheeks burned scarlet. "I-I do not! I got an erection thinking about...P-Paulina!"

"Well, if there were any doubts before," Clockwork said shrewdly, "they're all gone now. Anything you want to talk about, Danny?"

Danny frowned. "I thought you stopped calling me that."

Clockwork shrugged. "It seemed you needed reminding that, despite my supposedly neutral position, I am your friend and here for you whenever you feel that you can't talk to anyone around you."

The ghost boy sighed, sitting on the toilet, hands wringing together.

"I promise I will not judge you, Danny."

And the floodgates opened.

"Is it normal, Clockwork? To feel like this about *Dan* ? He's older than me! He's half Vlad, the man who wanted to be my *father* ! He's half *me* ! He's insane, he's selfish, he's evil, he's..."

"He's...?" Clockwork prompted.

"He's the only one who knows me," Danny deflated. "He may be absolutely horrible, but he gets me. He doesn't think any less of me when I'm being an asshole. He doesn't tell me I'm not being myself when I'm insensitive or dickish or whatever. He doesn't judge me. I could probably tell him I got a hard-on thinking of him, and he'd just shrug it off."

"So, why not tell him?"

"Because, then what?"

Clockwork raised a non-existent eyebrow. "What do you mean?"

"He'll tell me he's not interested or that he likes Paulina or something. Why would he like me?"

"Why would he not?"

Danny scoffed. "I have a penis."

"Who says he cares?" Clockwork countered.

"It's not normal."

The older ghost actually groaned, "Danny, your parents are ghost hunters; you gained ghost powers by extremely questionable means; one of your best friends was the youngest mayor in history; your

friends with the Master of Time and the Grim Reaper's children; your roommate is your alternate future self who, news flash, hits on you. *Nothing in your life is normal* ."

"Thanks for that," Danny replied sardonically.

"What I mean is that, by your definition, there is very little in your life that actually qualifies as normal. Maybe your definition does not apply to you; perhaps it is time to seek a new definition of normal and, failing that, defining normal for yourself."

"...What?"

" *Kids* ," Clockwork sighed. "If 'normal' doesn't apply to you, maybe it's because what other people think is normal doesn't apply to you. If that's the case, maybe everything you think is 'weird' is actually your 'normal'. It's not about what is *normal* ; it's about what makes you happy."

The halfa snorted. "Dan makes me *happy* ?"

Clockwork glanced pointedly at Danny's crotch. "Doesn't he?"

Despite himself, Danny laughed. "Maybe in some ways."

"He's a good friend, isn't he?"

"A very good friend, turns out."

"Why not give him the opportunity to be more?"

"Because I'm scared; I'm scared of what my friends and my parents and my sister will say; and what if I want him less than I think I do? What if all this is just Dan manipulating me?"

Clockwork nodded. "That's a possibility. But what if it isn't?"

Danny squinted his eyes at Clockwork. "What's with you? It's almost like you *want* me and Dan to get together."

"I am merely playing devil's advocate," Clockwork replied, "In the end, you'll know what is best for you and you'll pursue it. But I don't want you to write something off just because you don't think it's what other people describe as 'normal'."

Danny sighed and sat back, looking at the ceiling. "I guess you're right. Do I just...test the waters?"

"Better than always wondering, at least. Besides, if Dan is manipulating you so you like him, why not play him at his own game?"

"What do you mean?"

Clockwork floated to the mirror, seemingly gazing at himself. "It stands to reason that, if Dan *were* manipulating you, it would be to make it so he was invaluable to you, so you never erase him. The truth of the matter is that your friends and family will die and you will need a companion."

"And, admittedly, I wouldn't mind if it were Dan," Danny interjected.

"So why not do the same to him? Why not make yourself as necessary to him as he will be to you? Manipulate the manipulator."

Danny's eyes widened and the silence stretched on as the seed was planted. Clockwork was making a good point. Dan—the only person Danny could see himself spending the next few millennia with without feeling guilty; the only person who didn't care how Danny acted and accepted all of him; the only person who could keep on challenging him; the one person who was rapidly becoming Danny's world.

And Danny was not opposed to this, as long as he was similarly the only one occupying the whole of Dan's world.

"Well? What do you think?"

The halfa grinned in response and Clockwork smirked back.

"Let's get to work, then."

And so time marches on...

Breathe

I'm sorry this took a while to get out. I won't make any excuses this time; I lost the muse for a bit and I didn't try to get it back. But some very lovely reviews and messages prompted me to try my hand at another chapter again. Despite having everything planned out, it's hard to fill in.

I'll try not to take two years for the next chapter. I hope 20+ pages of chapter make up for it.

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"Well? What do you think?"

The halfa grinned in response and Clockwork smirked back.

"Let's get to work, then."

And so time marches on...

"Those lotions Paulina told me about better be in the mall. I'm gonna get so pissed if I have to fly to Argentina or something just to keep my hands soft," Dan complained as they walked to school that morning. Danny shook his head with an amused smile, allowing the

disguised former villain his piece. Since the talk in the bathroom, Danny was content to allow Dan to monopolize their conversation, as he needed the time to think of a plan.

But how does one manipulate a master manipulator? Danny thought, biting his lip.

It was obvious Danny would need some help from someone, but there weren't many people out there that he knew whose forte was the art of seduction and manipulation—except, maybe, Spectra, but he certainly wasn't going to open that can of scorpions.

The school building loomed closer and finally Dan's tirade ended as both ghosts noticed Tucker standing in front of the school. The pair glanced at each other before silently deciding to approach him.

"Hey, Tuck," Danny greeted first, a cautious smile on his lips, "Funny seeing you here."

"Sad thing is, that's probably true," Tucker replied easily. "I'm sorry we've been bad friends to you lately. I tried to convince them to drop their grudges against Dan a while ago, but they aren't listening to me. I think Kwan agrees with me, though, so maybe he'll come around pretty soon. Meantime, Dan has my vote so far."

Dan raised a brow. "That's cool. I appreciate that, I guess."

"Thanks, Tucker," Danny grinned. "It means a lot to both of us. C'mon, let's go inside. We have a lot to catch up on."

"Do tell," the techno-geek smiled, joining the two ghosts as they entered the school.

They trekked slowly through the school, turning invisible and being silent when passing faculty. Dan shook his head, amused that they were basically skipping classes *inside* school. Danny explained their forays in hell with the family Grim and the combat lessons Dan had engaged Danny in. With a bit of prodding, Danny told Tucker about

their visit to Paulina's house and how they revealed themselves to her. As Danny was wrapping up how Paulina's father insisted on Danny eating an entire plate of *tostones con salami y queso*, the fifth period bell rang and icicles in the form of blue mist escaped Danny's mouth. A quick glance affirmed that a similar mist, only in red, accompanied Danny's ghost sense.

"Damn. I was hoping for a day off," Danny sighed.

"I can handle it," Dan shrugged. "I could use the exercise and I know you're sore from last night." Danny smiled, opening his mouth to reply, but Dan continued. "Besides, I can tell you want to tell Tucker something pretty badly and that you want it to be private, so I may as well entertain myself." With that, the older ghost sauntered into a closet and, moments later, "Danny Phantom" flew out towards the errant ghost. Danny chuckled and shrugged, turning to Tucker.

"Well, let's not lose the opportunity."

Tucker cocked his head to the side as they resumed their walking. "So, there really *is* something you wanna tell me without him around? When did he get so good at reading you? Or is that like twin mentality, since part of you is in him?"

"I don't think that's it," Danny sighed. "I think maybe that's a small contributor, but we've gotten really close over the last week and a half or so. It's ridiculous, because it feels like so much more time has passed by. But, with everything we've told each other and all the training we've been through, I really feel myself starting to trust him. That being said...we're friends, right, Tuck?"

"Uh, yeah," Tucker paused, frowning. "We're best friends. Why?"

Danny swallowed. "Because...because there's something I want to tell you and I don't know how you'll take it. I don't want to lose my best friend to something I can't control."

"You're not gonna tell me you have feelings for Dan, are you?"

Tucker laughed as he moved to turn down the hall. He stopped when he noticed that Danny continued walking straight, towards a dead end in the hall. Confused, Tucker followed him; as he did, it dawned on the teen that Danny hadn't replied to his joke.

"Danny... *are* you telling me you have feelings for your evil, alternate future *male* self?" Danny still didn't reply. Breathing deeply, Tucker steeled himself. "Because, that's cool with me. I mean, as long as you guys aren't phasing through my house and doing your thing on my bed, I really don't care as long as you're happy."

Danny turned incredulous crystal blue eyes on the other teenager. "Really ? I mean...I never bothered to ask where you stand on guys liking guys. Then, compounded by the fact that he's...well, *Dan* ...I just wasn't sure what to expect from you."

"Danny," Tucker sighed, smiling as he patted Danny's shoulder, "Dude, we grew up together. We saved the world together. We've almost *died* together. Compared to all that, who you wanna bump uglies with is pretty unimportant as long as it's healthy."

Danny raised a brow. "Healthy? *Dan* ?"

"Fair enough. I *am* worried about *why* you suddenly like Dan and I'm worried that it basically took no time for you to develop feelings for him, but I don't care about the mechanics of it. If you happened to like another time-traveling, alternate-future male ghost who was a nice guy, I would say go for it."

"Thanks, Tuck," Danny laughed. "That means a lot to me."

"Besides, at least it's not Skulker."

Danny shuddered. "Sick, Tucker."

Tucker shrugged. "So, what brought this on anyway?"

Danny placed a hand on Tucker's shoulder and made both of them intangible as they walked through the walls of the school. They walked out of the side of the building and began walking aimlessly across the schoolyard. Clicking his tongue, Danny finally answered once he deemed them a safe enough distance. "Remember that companion Clockwork promised me when he released Dan?"

Tucker's eyes widened in understanding and he nodded.

"I'm thinking it'll probably be Dan. I love you guys and I know you'll always be there for me, but none of you really *understand* me. You *know* what I go through and you see what I am and who I've become, but you guys can never really understand me. And, I know it's not for lack of trying, but I will always feel like the odd man out because you're all talking about college and careers and all I've known since I was fourteen was saving the world and all I want to *do* is keep saving it. I can't go to school for that; I can't save the world from space by being an astronaut; I can't even leave Amityville without being swarmed by fans or stalkers or whatever.

You know I can't stand it anymore when people lie to me or when they like me just because I'm Phantom. That's all I'll ever encounter. And for every one person who might like me for me, there are a hundred more who just want to be my friend so they can say they know Danny Phantom. I'll snap again and scare more people away, like when I first got really famous.

And, Christ, I just can't deal with real life anymore. I know I should be happy and I should feel privileged, but I *can't stand the quiet*. I hate how boring life has become when I'm not constantly putting my life on the line for something. Maybe being master of time is slower than what I'm used to, but it's so much better than pretending I can be normal anymore. There are days I wake up with my ectoblasts ready because I'm dreaming about beating Vlad or something. And none of you will ever really understand me and all my feelings. But..."

Tucker nodded again. "But Dan will."

"Yeah. Dan will always understand me. It's like...I'm saying all this stuff and I'm waiting for you guys to tell me I'm not crazy. And none of you say I'm crazy, but none of you really agree with me. But Dan? Dan will say I'm not crazy; he'll say he gets it because he feels the same exact way; he'll make it so I don't feel alone anymore."

"And...and if he's manipulating you? So you don't erase him?"

Danny chuckled sardonically. "So? That doesn't make what I've said any less true; it doesn't make what I feel any less real. Without him, I feel so, so alone. I didn't realize it until he and I started being more friendly and I started feeling jealous about all the time he and Paulina spend together, but I feel alone without him. Don't get me wrong; I am a little worried about being manipulated into this, but I feel insane without him. With him, the world makes sense again. / make sense again."

Tucker stuffed his hands in his pockets. "So...about this stuff you're saying that makes you sound crazy...?"

"C'mon, Tucker," Danny sighed. "You and I both know that, even if you guys and my family are seemingly okay with my... *transition* , none of you really get why I gave in so easily. None of you understand why I'm so eager to die. And I couldn't tell you why I feel alive when I'm dead, but that's how I feel."

"You're right. I don't really get it, but I'm your friend and I will support you no matter what," Tucker smiled. "So, what's the plan?"

Danny smiled back. "Thanks, Tuck. As for the plan...I know I said it doesn't really matter that Dan is manipulating me into needing him, because all he's really doing is speeding up a process that probably would've happened organically. But that doesn't mean I can't fight back."

"How?" Tucker cocked his head to the side, curious.

Danny grinned as he held open the door to Nasty Burger for Tucker, then followed his friend to a table. "Make it so he needs me just as much as I need him. Manipulate the manipulator."

"We could always ask Spectra," Tucker replied with a tilt of his head.

"Tucker, *no* ."

Tucker laughed. "Okay, okay. Did you already ask Clockwork?"

"Clockwork is encouraging this, but he shouldn't meddle more than he already has. He has the observers constantly on him enough as is; I don't want them to take this as another reason to discredit me as Clockwork's protégé."

"That makes sense," Tucker sighed, leaning back. "Well, what does Dan *need* ? More than existing, I mean. And can you provide that?"

Danny hummed, watching for the waitress. "I don't really know..."

"Are you gonna talk to Sam about this? Or Kwan and Dash?"

"God, no!" Danny blurted. "I mean, I definitely want to make up with them, but I can't imagine trying to explain this to them when they've been this hardheaded about him being my friend."

"Well, we're both kind of out of our depths here and I think it would be wise to get some help. What about Jazz?"

Danny lifted a skeptical brow. "My *sister* ? Seriously, Tuck? Then she'll spend the rest of the year trying to dissect my brain. She already probably thinks I have some issues as it is. I really don't want to encourage her."

Tucker frowned in response, waving again for the waitress. "I think you're giving your sister too little credit. Hasn't Jazz always been on your side? Even when Sam or I wanted to lecture you, Jazz has always encouraged you. And isn't college supposed to open your mind anyway?"

"Not to near incest," Danny grimaced.

"It's not incest if it's you, Danny," Tucker rolled his eyes. "He's not your brother or anything. And it's not necessarily illegal, really. He's right in the ephebophilia range, granted, but if you guys wait until you turn eighteen to do anything, he won't be a creeper anymore."

Danny smirked. "He'll *a/ways* be a creeper."

"Fair enough. My point still stands."

"Fine, so not incest," the halfa conceded, "but definitely narcissism to the extreme."

"What's wrong with that, really?" Tucker shrugged, smiling at the waitress who quickly took their orders and walked away. "Everyone is a little conceited. Hell, our brains make us more attractive to ourselves than we really are. And who knows what we find attractive. Maybe we all look for a little bit of ourselves when we're looking for a soulmate. We like to pretend we can understand the mind and the way we function, but we don't really. Psychology is the *attempt* to study the mind; not the *successful* study of the mind. In the end, it doesn't matter that we don't understand and it doesn't matter if it doesn't seem right to us or to anybody else. If *you* are okay with it and if *you* are in possession of all your faculties and no one is being coerced, then no one else has the right to tell you what will make you happy."

Danny blinked. "Wow, Tuck."

"You'd be surprised what you learn in home ec."

Danny laughed and Tucker joined him quickly. Heaving a great sigh, Danny wiped a laughter-induced tear from his eye and smiled. "So, Jazz?"

"I think it would be best to ask her, yes."

"She's never even had a boyfriend, far as I know. And Johnny doesn't count."

"She doesn't need to have had a boyfriend to be smarter than us."

"Touché."

Their orders were placed on the table wordlessly, and the boys took the time to eat quietly. Eventually, the conversation started again, drifting through sports and school and summer. During the next lull, as they crumpled up their wrappers and focused on their drinks, Danny took the opportunity to ask.

"So, what *have* you been doing? I know you have a life outside me, but it's hard to imagine it."

Tucker rolled his eyes. "Oh, ha ha. Honestly, not a whole lot. I've been focusing on some internships I can do now before college. Being mayor for a while pretty much got me a good college fund, so I'm gonna use college to really focus on what I want."

"What *do* you want? I thought you were going to MIT or something."

Tucker shrugged. "I thought about it, because tech is my thing, but I think I did a pretty good job as mayor, too, don't you think?"

Danny nodded easily.

"So, I was thinking of double majoring in tech and in political science, so I could go into politics."

"That sounds awesome, Tucker," Danny smiled. "I think you'd be a great politician. It's not often we can have an experienced hacker in the Senate."

Tucker grinned. "Or in the White House."

"Or in the White House," Danny agreed with a laugh.

"Thanks, dude," Tucker looked away, "Not a lot of people have faith in me as a politician, because my hobbies scream 'introvert,' but I really feel like I could make a difference. Even being well off, it's hard not feeling like I'm the token black kid."

Danny frowned. "I'm sorry, dude. I didn't know you felt that way."

Tucker shrugged. "It's not the sort of thing you'd understand, really."

Tucker smirked. "Maybe I do understand this ghost thing of yours, in a sense."

It's not your fault or anything, and I appreciate you never treating me any differently. But, it's something I'm noticing more and more as I get older. Like, people making really racist jokes super casually, then getting mad when I point it out, and saying they're not racist. They don't get why that offends me and I feel like, if I wanna change that, I have to make other fundamental changes to our country first."

"Godspeed, Tuck," Danny smiled. "You can definitely do it. I'll come back and vote for you."

Tucker smirked. "Great. You mind if I also use your image in my campaign? 'A vote for Tucker Foley is a vote not to have Danny Phantom toast your ass!'"

Danny snickered. "Whatever gets you in the Oval Office, Tuck."

Tucker laughed, shaking his head. "We're a mess. And, while I appreciate us focusing on my life for a bit, we really should consider what you're gonna tell your sister about Dan."

Danny nodded, sighing. "But how do I explain to Jazz that I'm sure about my feelings? So she doesn't think it's all an unhealthy manipulation?"

Tucker shrugged, lapsing into silence as he drew out his phone. Danny settled back into contemplation and Tucker entertained himself with Instagram. Danny ran through scenarios of how Jazz

would react in his head, each reaction less encouraging than the first. Dejected, Danny focused on Tucker again, only then noting that Tucker's mouth was hanging open as Tucker stared at the screen.

" *Holy shit* ," Tucker breathed.

"What?"

Wordlessly, Tucker held up the phone to Danny. Blinking, Danny watched as a recorded video started. His eyes widened when he saw Sam, Dan, and Paulina were the stars.

His heart felt as though it completely stopped once he watched the whole thing.

" *Jesus* ," he said. "Is that real? That can't be real."

"It is," Tucker said unhappily. "What the hell is *wrong* with her? I thought she was gonna back off. That's what they agreed on that night we hung out together."

Danny heaved a great sigh and stood. "Tuck, that's not fair. Sam's only doing what she thinks is best and, no matter what, she's our best friend. We gotta find her. She looked like she was crying."

With a grim nod, Tucker grabbed Danny's arm and allowed the halfa to fly them back to school.

Dan scowled as the Fenton Thermos sucked up Technus— *again* . "Seriously, guy," the disguised ghost muttered, "If you're gonna break out, could you at least do something new? Or something that doesn't take forever?" Dan looked around in dismay at the smartphones and laptops that had suffered Technus' wrath; then he looked at the clock and shook his head, amazed that it was nearly his lunch period. With a long-suffering sigh, Dan pocketed the thermos and flew back to Amityville High. As he landed and changed back to 'Ezra' behind a

tree, he considered what Danny might be saying to Tucker and if he'd returned yet.

He might be talking about me , Dan thought, but shook his head in denial. *Even if we've been close, I haven't done anything to overtly suggest that our relationship might be more than friendly .*

"Besides," Dan muttered to himself as he walked to the outdoor lunch tables, "he's probably not ready for that."

"Not ready for what?" a voice asked; Dan rolled his eyes.

"Hello, Samantha," he droned, turning to face her; Sam squared her shoulders and walked towards him from her hiding spot behind a bush. "Stalking me, now?"

"I couldn't find you or Danny," she said by way of explanation. "What do you mean, he's not ready for that? Who's 'he'? What are you planning?"

Dan put on a hurt expression. "I can't believe you still don't trust me, Sam. Have I done anything to deserve this treatment?"

"Oh, don't play cute," Sam spat. "Danny has been my best friend for longer than I remember; and even if we didn't work out, Danny and I are always going to be together, because we care about each other. As his friend, as his *best friend* , I plan on taking care of him whenever I can because, sometimes, he doesn't take care of himself.

I don't know what you have planned, but I'm not gonna let you worm your way into Danny's heart and then rip it out the second you get the chance." Sam stared directly into Dan's eyes. "Even if that means you have to be *erased* ."

Sam stepped close into Dan's space, glaring at him from under his nose. Dan sneered back.

"I'm warning you, *Ezra* . Whatever sick, perverted plans you have for Danny, you'd better just lay them to rest and *behave* ."

Dan opened his mouth to reply, but was stopped by a trilling, accented laugh. Sam stepped back, looking around his larger frame at the owner. Curious, Dan turned and faced a chortling Paulina.

"Oh, my god. Is that the best you've got?" Paulina said, sauntering over. With a frown, Dan noted that classes let out for lunch already, as a small crowd started drawing towards them.

A scene. Dan thought darkly. *Wonderful* .

"Paulina," he sighed, "Look, I appreciate what you're trying to do, but —"

"Ezra, you're too nice," Paulina said suddenly. Bemused, Sam and Dan fell silent. Undeterred, Paulina slowed to a stop once she was directly in front of Sam, arms akimbo and head tilted to the side, in a familiar cocky pose Dan vividly remembered from Danny's freshman year. "She wants to intimidate you into leaving Danny alone, because she's worried that Danny having friends who understand him instead of trying to *control him* would mean he'd leave her and *she'd have nothing* ."

Sam opened her mouth to retort, cheeks flushed an angry red, but Paulina steamrolled her objections easily.

"Whatever delusions you're having about Ezra's intentions are just that— *delusions* , Samantha. You sure you're over Danny? Because it really feels like you don't like how close Ezra and Danny are and you're *projecting* how you feel about Danny to Ezra. What did you call it? Sick? *Perverted* ? Where's your proof, Sam? Who else sees these things you supposedly see in Ezra?"

"I—I..." Sam frowned, looking doubtful for the first time. "But...I *know* what I saw—!"

"Do you know what I see?" Paulina interrupted again. "I see a girl who can't let go. This is the only world you know and you cling desperately to it because it's all you have. The rest of us have moved on and changed and grown, but you're still the same girl who hated me for being 'fake' and who thinks she's so above the rest of us idiots. It's time to wake up, Sam. It's been *three years* ."

"Oh, don't give me that shit, Paulina!" Sam growled. "Why are you even defending him? If you saw what I saw and if you cared an iota about Danny, you wouldn't want anything to do with this creep! You have no idea what you're even talking about, so I don't know why you're sticking your nose into it, but yes ; he is *sick* and *perverted* and obviously planning to do something to Danny that I don't even want to say out loud."

"Seriously, girls," Dan tried, "Maybe we should discuss this somewhere more private."

But he was ignored again.

"I'm defending someone who made the mistake of being a better friend to Danny than you! I'm defending someone who treats Danny with respect and, as a reward, got all of Danny's attention! I feel like that says something more about *you* , and how *you* treat Danny. And don't you tell me what I do and don't know! I know more than you do, *Samantha* . I'll even share with you. You know what's your problem, Sam? You *love* Danny so much and you want to protect him from everything, but it always has to be on *your* terms! What about what Danny feels? Why don't you ask him instead of trying to control his life? Why do you think he *dumped* you?"

Sam laughed, the sound sharp and brittle. "Dumped *me* ? Get your facts straight. *I* dumped *him* !"

"Really?" Paulina asked, suddenly quiet. Dan's brows raised in surprise as Sam took half a step back. "Because what it sounds like to me is Danny left you first in all the ways that mattered. Danny was planning to go to another college—far away from you. I know

because *he told me* . Danny probably stopped hanging out with you before you broke up. Probably never called often. Probably made excuses when you asked to go out. Probably hung out with other girls behind your back. Probably couldn't even *get it up*— "

"Stop it!" Sam cried, covering her ears. Her body trembled slightly.

"You wanna threaten people?" Paulina asked, voice heavy with condescension. "Let me show you how it's done." She leaned in close and waited until Sam fixed her glassy, purple eyes on Paulina's teal ones. The smile on Paulina's face was vicious.

"Stay away from Ezra, Sam."

With that, Paulina turned on her heel, grabbed Dan's hand, and dragged him away from the silent crowd gathered around Sam.

Dumbly, Dan allowed himself to be led away until they were alone. "I thought you were going to threaten her?" he asked quietly.

"The best threat is the one you don't say and is still understood," the Latina replied. They stood together, hiding at the side of the building, facing away from each other.

"Thanks, I guess," Dan finally muttered. His hands clenched and he felt frustratingly young for a 28 year old. Paulina didn't reply.

Dan stared out into the lawn of the school, hands clenching and unclenching rhythmically. This wasn't his thing—he didn't *do* emotions. Dan was so sure he'd killed the majority of his emotions, that he could only feel the *useful* ones. Things like anger, satisfaction, lust. He didn't expect to feel so overwhelmed, to have his chest feel fuller than he could ever remember it feeling. It was so unfamiliar, he felt like a teenager again. It almost felt like the night Jazz accepted him, agreed to help him win over Danny, because she believed Dan wouldn't hurt him. It felt almost exactly like the night Paulina accepted him, because she believed *Dan* , not Clockwork.

But it was more so—so much more full that Dan felt like he needed to breathe despite being technically dead.

Paulina made him feel that, Dan realized. *Paulina* made him feel things he didn't know he was capable of.

Paulina made him feel things that Danny *didn't* .

"Are *you* okay?" he finally asked.

Paulina drew in a great breath. "No...but I will be."

"Is there anything I can do to help?" Dan asked, haltingly, the words unfamiliar in his mouth.

Paulina snorted, "Is that the first time you've ever said that sentence?"

"Could be," Dan smirked. "Just for you."

Paulina blinked, bemused, and turned to look at him. Her eyes softened as they stared at each other. "Just for me," she muttered.

Swallowing, Dan nodded.

The Latina graced him with a smile. "Thank you, Ezra. I could use a hug."

Dan raised a brow, but shrugged and opened his arms minutely. Paulina rolled her eyes, but the quirk of her lips gave her away, and Dan smiled back. She stepped into his arms and wrapped her own around his shoulders. Carefully, Dan wrapped his around her waist, stooping a bit to accommodate her height.

"Thank you, Ezra," she whispered again.

"You *can* call me Dan," he replied quietly, "We're alone, you know."

She shook her head. "I prefer Ezra. It's a name you chose for you, not a name based on where you came from. It's just for you."

Dan bit his lip, contemplating. "Just for me..."

Sam wasn't at the school when they arrived and, as much as Danny wanted to know why Dan and Paulina were *embracing* in some hidden corner of the school, Danny and Tucker agreed it was more important to find Sam first. Danny flew around, leaving Tucker to run the streets and check social media.

An hour passed, and even searching her house (intangible and invisible, of course) yielded nothing. Danny was just about to try mass replication to find her, but his phone lit up. Danny hurriedly pulled the device out of his pocket, but sighed when the display read Jazz's name instead of Sam's. Still, he answered. "Jazz? What's up? You usually text."

"Danny, do you remember that part of the mayor's mansion they sectioned off?"

Danny frowned. "Uh, the lab? Yeah, I remember it. Why do you ask?"

"Sam called me and asked me to go there. I don't know how she got in, but she says she's in there and she sounded pretty bad—not 'in danger' bad, just...depressed. I think maybe you should come, too, even if she didn't invite you."

Danny felt his whole body relax at the news, relief coursing through him. "Thank you, Jazz. I'll be right there. I just have to get Tuck."

"Okay, then."

"Jazz?" Danny bit his lip. "Did...did you see the video on Instagram?"

The line was silent and Danny took the opportunity to send a quick text to Tucker. "Yeah, I saw it. It was pretty intense. That's why she's hiding, isn't it?"

"Yeah. Jazz, there's a lot you and I have to talk about after we help Sam out, but a lot of what Sam said about Dan...it's not true, you know. He's not sick and perverted, or whatever."

Jazz chuckled quietly. "I know he's not, Danny. Whatever you want to talk to me about, I promise I'm all ears and no judgement."

"I'd appreciate that, sis," Danny smiled, but it faded quickly from his face. "I really need your help for this and you're the only one I can depend on. I know I don't normally say that kind of stuff out loud, but..."

The image of Dan and Paulina in each other's arms burned, making his stomach churn unpleasantly.

"...But I think I'm losing something I didn't even know I had and I don't know what to do."

"Whatever you need, Danny," Jazz said, her confident tone restoring Danny's resolve. "I'm here for you. Always."

Danny found Tucker quickly and sped towards the mansion, where Jazz was waiting outside the door. Without a word, Danny took her hand and phased both of them through the cement, eventually landing in the dilapidated basement.

The mansion, another of Vlad's artifacts, was filled to the brim with Wisconsin cheese iconography and ghost paraphernalia. Like the lab Valerie had destroyed years ago, this lab was dedicated to the search for either a cure for the ghost syndrome both Danny and Vlad had or with cloning.

While the other lab was dedicated to cloning Danny, this particular lab was dedicated to cloning Maddie Fenton. Disgusted by the floating, naked bodies that resembled his mother, Danny had asked Tucker to shut down the mansion and block off the lab. Tucker, then-mayor, agreed to shut the whole building down and sealed off the lab, as the elements within the lab were too volatile to immediately expel. Apparently, there was still a way into the lab.

A quick glance revealed that Sam was huddled by the desk.

"Sam," Danny started, walking towards her. "Are you okay?"

Sam sniffed. "No."

Jazz bit her lip and approached as well. "Sam, we're here to listen. We're still your friends."

Noticeably less sympathetic, Tucker joined them and patted her back mutely.

"...Was she right?" Sam asked. The others looked at each other, silent. Sam elaborated. "Was Paulina right about me? About me being controlling? About me not knowing enough to judge Dan's intentions?"

Danny frowned. "What do you think his intentions *are* ?"

Sam finally lifted her head, eyes red and swollen. "Danny, I don't know if you've noticed, but to me, it looks like Dan wants to eat you. He always stares at you, and it's so obviously lecherous. He doesn't hide it at all, it's like he *wants* you to know."

Silence.

"What's wrong with that?" Danny asked after a moment.

Sam turned to him, mouth agape. "What do you mean?! He's obviously obsessed with you! He's probably planning on manipulating you and convincing you that you're gay or something

and you want him so that he can survive and then he'll *kill* you because you could never hurt anyone you care about!"

Danny braced himself. "But it doesn't matter if he doesn't manipulate me, does it? Sam, you didn't bother to ask me what *I* thought was going on. You took it upon yourself to interfere in my life and protect me from Dan, but I'm not the same kid I was three years ago. I need you to trust me to make my own decisions and to be there for me when I mess up.

Sam, I need you to be my friend."

Watery, wide amethyst eyes stared at him. "Danny?"

Danny crouched in front of her and gently grasped her hand, his eyes beseeching. "Sam, *trust me* . I don't know what's at the core of all this, but *trust me* . I will *always* need you to be my friend, but I need you to be the friend who lets me grow up."

She grasped his hand with both of hers. "Danny...I'm so sorry. I'm so used to always being right and things turning out okay when I go off on my own..." Sam looked away. "Paulina was right. I'm still stuck back in freshman year, I guess.

But freshman year made so much more sense to me. Everything was hard, but I knew who I was. Now, I have no idea. Who *am* I without Danny Phantom, Danny? What do I *do* ? I'm not as smart as I thought I was; I'm not the best athlete among us anymore; I'm not even a good feminist, apparently, because I'm so damn judgmental of other girls; I don't even know what I want to do when I go to college. I just picked the university farthest away from the one my parents wanted for me. I have no idea what I want out of life. When you stopped saving the world, I knew it was hard on you, but it was hard on me, too. What was I supposed to do when all I saw myself doing was helping you save the world? And now that's being taken from me, because I can't follow you to where you're going. God... who *am* I?"

Danny smiled kindly. "Sam...are you kidding? You're Samantha *freaking* Manson. You set the bar for originality in our school. You're amazing at research and you're fearless. You're super rich and you don't let that influence the way you are, because you're so humble. You don't need *me* to define you, Sam. You define you. You're gonna hate what I have to say," Danny warned with a good-humored cringe, "but you and Paulina are actually really similar."

Sam scoffed. "You're kidding."

"I'm not kidding." Danny sobered. "Sam, I spent the day at Paulina's house, and she has a huge bookcase in her room; her room is *not* pink; she only has one poster of me; and she was so scared of her friends figuring out that she was smart, that she hid that side of herself and is only now letting it out. She's just trying to figure out who she is."

Jazz interjected gently. "We all are, Sam. All the time. It doesn't stop, no matter how old you get."

"Then what's the point?" Sam sighed.

Tucker grinned. "C'mon, Sam. You'd get bored if things never changed."

"And if things never changed, we'd never learn anything, Sam," Jazz continued. "The beauty in us always finding ourselves is that we always become better people. Don't be down on yourself because you misjudged someone, Sam. You're not any less a feminist because you attacked another girl; you're *human* ."

Finally, the black-haired girl smiled. "Yeah...maybe you're right."

"You don't have to figure out who you are right now, Sam," Danny said, hand still clutching hers, "You just have to be honest with yourself and give others the same chance to be honest with you."

Sam chuckled. "By that logic, I'd have to give Paulina a chance. She's the only person who's ever called me on my shit like that. And maybe I owe Dan an apology, but that doesn't make what I saw any less distressing, especially since you basically confirmed it, Danny. What is going on with you two?"

Danny averted his eyes. "I think I know, but I need to do a bit of soul searching myself before I make a decision. For now, just trust me. I've got this."

Sam opened her mouth quickly, eyebrows drawn together in a familiar, stubborn expression. However, no sound came out and her face soon smoothed over. With a heavy sigh, Sam nodded, giving Danny a painful smile.

"You're right. Okay. I trust you."

Danny grinned. "Thanks, Sam."

Jazz huffed. "Good. Can we get out of here? This place is still creepy. Why did you even come here?"

Sam's brows furrowed again. "Not sure. The Dan thing has had me pretty distracted, but I had a bad feeling about this place and I decided to explore. For some weird reason, part of the cement that used to seal this place up was removed."

They looked at each other.

"Who could've removed it?" Danny asked.

No one answered.

Paulina shut the door to her room quietly, dropping her book bag to the floor and throwing herself on the bed in a smooth, practiced motion. She turned over and stared at her Danny Phantom poster.

Danny was still as handsome as ever in the poster, with his sure green eyes and ethereal silver hair. After he and Sam started dating, he didn't appeal to Paulina as much as he used to, and even less so recently. Instead, images of a brawnier, mature, sarcastic ghost flitted her senses.

With little warning, her bedroom door opened and Star walked in; the blonde immediately raised a brow at her friend.

"Okay, so, I know I haven't been in the loop since I got sick, but *what* was that on Instagram today? And who's that new kid?"

Paulina looked at her through narrowed eyes. "Are you contagious?"

Star rolled her eyes. "Uh, no. It was just a cold, girl. I took an extra day to go to the spa. Can we focus? Instagram? That hottie you were defending from Miss Mary Sue Manson?"

Paulina giggled. "Shut up, that's a terrible nickname. That hottie is the new student, who you would've met if you'd bothered to come to school. He's an exchange student from Australia or something and he's living with the Fenton's for the year."

"The Fenton's? I didn't know they were a foster family for international kids," Star shrugged, splaying herself on Paulina's bed. "That's cool. Does not explain the video, though."

"Geez, one track mind," Paulina sighed. "Fine. I just got so tired of that girl. She's always judging people and I figured it was time someone treated her to her own medicine. Besides, she's just mad because Ezra is already really close to Danny and even helping him train."

"Wow, really?" Star twirled some of her long hair with a finger. "I'm sorry I missed all this tension. You miss one week, yeesh."

Paulina smirked. "Maybe next time you'll remember to invite me to the spa. Anyway, she was being all weird and paranoid because

Ezra has a bit of a crush on Danny, and I didn't stand for it."

"I can tell," Star replied, rewatching the video on her phone. "You really laid into her. Damn. Wait, did you say Ezra has a crush on Danny? Side note, he has such a hot name. Oh, my god."

"Star!" Paulina laughed. "He really does have a hot name. And yeah, he's pretty obvious about being bisexual. He really hit on Danny pretty hard, but Danny is oblivious and straight, so I think he gave up on Danny. Maybe."

"Maybe?"

"I don't know," the Latina frowned. "He was just in here the other day, telling me he liked Danny—" which was not quite correct, Paulina reasoned, but was as close to the truth as Paulina could probably tell Star—"but then he and I have gotten really...close. Especially after that Sam thing."

"Yeah?" Star looked excited. "How close?"

Paulina bit her lip. "I took him aside, like, to the side of the school. We talked for a bit and he didn't really say much, but it still made me feel better. And then we hugged. Mind you, this guy does not let anyone but Danny Fenton touch him. He flipped when someone accidentally bumped into him once. But he hugged me. And then he asked me if he could help somehow, and he admitted he usually doesn't care about people, so that was probably the first time he'd ever asked anyone if he could help."

Star laughed. "Seriously?"

"Seriously. It even sounded weird, having him ask if he could help. And...just...it was kind of romantic, how he said he was willing to do that, just for me."

"Oh, my god. He really said that?"

"Star, I'm not kidding! And then we kept hugging and I thought we were... *maybe* ...gonna kiss, but he kept hugging me until I let go and then he took me to lunch since we missed it, fighting with Sam. We hung out in the park for a while, talked some more, and then he dropped me off here. You must've just missed him when you came in."

"He really sounds like a gentleman."

"He's usually not," Paulina admitted readily.

"Maybe he is for you?" Star suggested with a shit-eating grin.

Paulina smiled. "Just for me..." Suddenly, the smile fell off her face. "Oh, my god. What am I *doing* ?"

Star was taken aback. "Uh, I assume getting some Aussie tail and then sharing the deets with me because I refuse to go to Australia to die?" Paulina didn't laugh. "What's wrong, babe?"

Paulina groaned, falling backwards into her pillows. "I can't believe I forgot! *Danny* !"

"Danny? What about him? You're so over him."

"No, no, no, I know I said Danny was being oblivious and straight," Paulina sighed, "but I could tell Danny had a thing for Ezra. He still does. I can't believe I'm considering stealing Ezra from Danny!"

Star raised a brow. "Well, from what it sounds like, Ezra likes *you* better anyway."

"But, Danny..." Paulina frowned, unable to tell Star that Danny *needed* Dan, so that he could be the next master of time. "But, Danny and I are becoming pretty good friends now, too. I don't want to hurt his feelings."

"Girl," Star sighed, "I get it. Chicks before dicks, definitely. But don't cheat yourself out of something, or someone, you really want just

because you want to make everyone happy. You can't do that. And if Danny can't appreciate what's in front of him, maybe it's good that you and Ezra hook up, so Ezra can be properly appreciated."

Paulina nodded. "Maybe."

Star's brows drew together. "Or maybe you're trying to fill a hole that seems Ezra-shaped but really isn't."

"What do you mean?" Paulina asked after a beat.

"Paulina, you've had a lot of disappointments in your life. I know there were quite a few people who hurt you. I also know that Ezra probably reminds you of someone you really miss. But, Ezra is *Ezra* . Don't confuse him for that person."

Paulina rubbed at her eyes. "Yeah. Right."

Star stared at her friend; Paulina remained silent. With a sigh, the blonde took pity on Paulina and changed the subject.

"Did you know BCBG is having a sale this weekend?"

To Star's delight, Paulina immediately perked up.

Danny waved to Tucker as he and Jazz left Sam's mansion. Tucker waved back, having elected to stay with Sam to make sure she was okay. The siblings continued on their way to the Fenton home in silence.

Nearly.

"So, what did you want to talk to be about, Danny?"

Danny snorted. "How long were you holding that in?"

"Since I called you for Sam, but I've obviously learned patience in my old age. Now, c'mon. Tell me what's up."

Danny sighed, nodding, and told Jazz *everything* . All the training, all the conversations with Dan and Clockwork, all the awkward moments, all his arguments with his friends, all his not-arguments with Dan, all the jealousy, and—especially—the many times he'd seen Paulina and Dan get too close for comfort.

By the end of it, Jazz was pale.

"Jazz? Are you okay?" Danny asked, hesitantly.

Jazz nodded, exhaling shakily. "I-I'm fine."

Danny looked away. "You think it's weird, don't you?"

"No!" Jazz said, quickly. "Absolutely not. Definitely not that, Danny. It's just a lot to take in and...well, I haven't been exactly honest about what I know regarding this whole thing."

The halfa raised a brow. "Wait, what?"

"Clockwork approached me when Dan first arrived," Jazz explained. "And he showed me something, because I had figured out where yours and Dan's relationship would be going."

"He...showed you something?"

"Danny, before I tell you any of that, I want you to know that none of this is weird or wrong, no matter what anyone says. *Nothing* about your situation can be considered normal by any of our standards, which means it's unfair to judge it by those standards."

Danny's eyes widened, Clockwork's words echoing with Jazz's in his head.

"That being said, I understand. I get why Dan completes you and I understand that you can't help how you feel. I was mostly surprised it progressed so quickly. I thought it would take much more time. I really do understand and I definitely accept your feelings. I didn't at

first, because I was worried this bond between you was somehow manipulating you...but then I read your journal."

Danny sucked in a breath.

The journal .

"He let you read that?" Danny asked quietly.

"Yes," Jazz said, firmly, "And he told me what would happen if you read it yourself. Considering everything you've told me about how you feel, I think you should read it now."

Danny nodded. "So...these feelings...they didn't come from nowhere or from Dan manipulating me?"

Jazz smiled kindly. "No, I don't think so. I think they've always been deeper than that."

"But...that doesn't help me now, does it? I've realized my feelings too late. I knew Paulina and Dan getting close was bad news, but I didn't realize until today why I thought as much. They were alone and they were hugging, Jazz. How am I supposed to compete with *Paulina* ?"

Jazz's brow furrowed. "Maybe you should take some time to sort out your feelings completely, after you read your journal. There's no point approaching Dan with half-hearted feelings, which is how I feel you've been handling this from the beginning. Once you really know where you stand with how you feel about him, talk to him."

They stopped at the front door of the Fenton home and stared up at the imposing operations center on top of the building. Danny sighed, blue eyes taking in every detail. This house was where he gained his powers; this house was where his friendships with Sam and Tucker slowly evolved; this house was the constant backdrop to the many trials he'd faced, but no trial was quite as daunting as fully confronting his feelings for Dan.

"As for manipulating the manipulator," Jazz suddenly said, breaking Danny's reverie. "I don't think you have to manipulate anything to manipulate Dan."

"...What?"

"Sometimes, the only way to manipulate someone who is a master manipulator is to confront them with a truth or a need. Manipulating Dan? That's not your style. If you try to manipulate him, you'll play his game and you'll lose. But you're really good at providing things that people need, so what does Dan need?"

Danny frowned. "Tucker said the same thing."

"Well, let's analyze this—"

"Yay..."

"—Dan obviously has a thing for you and shows it; you kind of reciprocate, but you're not sure because you don't completely trust him not to betray you and because some aspects of his former self put you off. Correct?"

Danny nodded.

"Now, Dan makes friends with Paulina. You guys tell Paulina the truth, and after talking to Dan privately for a bit, Paulina suddenly seems okay with it. We can surmise she probably accepted Dan."

Danny nodded.

"So, Dan keeps making advances on you, which you kind of accept but kind of reject. Meanwhile, Paulina and Dan keep hanging out and, likely, get closer. Mind you, Paulina knows everything about Dan, too, and she shows no signs of being put off. Get me?"

Danny scowled. "She doesn't know *everything* about Dan."

"Possibly true, but not my point."

Danny shook his head. "I know. *I know* . I want to explore these feelings, but I didn't open my arms to Dan immediately and let him know I believe in him. But *Paulina* did."

Jazz shrugged. "You also have to confront that, Danny. Because, honestly, just because he's mellowed out, Dan is still Dan. Somewhere in there, there's a crazed, homicidal sociopath. He'll never stop being that."

Danny groaned, hitting his head against the door. "I just...I can't reconcile the Dan I know now and the Dan that beat me to near death. I don't know how to begin with that."

The redhead patted Danny's shoulder. "The best way to understand someone is to either listen to them or experience what they've experienced."

Danny hit his head again.

"Right. I'll get on that. I'll just ask him his favorite murder methods."

Jazz frowned, glancing away.

I am a monster...and you are my Frankenstein. Don't blame me for what I am.

"You know, when Frankenstein created his monster, all the monster ever wanted was acceptance and love. When he couldn't get it from humans, he asked Frankenstein to make him a mate."

Danny raised a brow. "Thanks for the literature lesson?"

"But I can't remember if Frankenstein ever listened when his monster told Frankenstein about all the horrible things the monster endured. All the rejection, the fear, the anger he must've felt."

Danny looked at her properly. "Jazz?"

"The monster never needed Frankenstein to listen to the people he'd killed on his journeys. I feel like the monster needed Frankenstein to listen to the things that *led* the monster to kill."

Danny sucked in a breath. Jazz turned back to him and smiled gently. As mature as Danny had become, Jazz sometimes forgot that Danny didn't have the experience she had. Sometimes—because Jazz would never tell him the answer outright—Danny just needed a few clues.

"Thanks, Jazz."

"Always, little brother."

Jazz raised a brow, trying and failing to hide her smile as she watched Dan bang his head against the wall in Danny's bedroom. Despite his superior senses, it seemed Dan still hadn't noticed her. Finally, Jazz cleared her throat.

Dan stopped mid-bang, but eventually let his head hit the wall once more before turning slightly to face Jazz. "Can I help you?"

She laughed. "I feel like I should be asking you that."

Dan shrugged and sat on the bed, facing her. Jazz's smile faded as she noticed the tenseness to Dan's shoulders. "Really, Dan, you can talk to me about anything. What's wrong?" she asked as she moved to sit beside him.

Dan groaned. "Why are you even here? Aren't you supposed to be in college?"

She shook her head. "Got a call from Sam a little while ago, so I came over for a couple of days to help. I can afford to miss class."

"How is Sam?" Dan asked, vaguely interested.

Jazz smiled, "Better. We walked her home to talk to her some more. She was having a bit of an identity crisis."

"And Danny?"

"Decided to go flying for a bit. He needed to clear his mind."

"I see."

"I hope you don't take what she said personally."

Dan shrugged. "Why should I? Besides, it's true, right?"

"It's not true," Jazz frowned. "You're not sick or perverted for how you feel."

"Maybe not," Dan muttered.

Jazz raised a brow. "You sure you're okay? You're kind of...off."

Dan sighed heavily. He was quiet for a while, but Jazz sat beside him the whole time. Finally, Dan answered. "I hugged Paulina and I liked it."

"Oh."

"I hugged Paulina and I liked *her* more than I like *Danny* ."

Jazz blinked. "Oh, shit."

Dan scowled. "Yeah, exactly. What now, oh guru? What do I do now?" He leapt off the bed, pacing the whole of the room—even the walls and the ceiling. "I was only brought back for *one* thing, and I fucked up and started wanting the wrong person! But how could I help it? She *likes* me! *Me* . Not Dan, not *Danny* —she likes Ezra."

Jazz watched him walk. "Are you Ezra more than you are Dan?"

"Yes! No? I don't know! I just know she makes me feel things Danny hasn't."

"What things?"

"I feel accepted by her. She doesn't try to explain away some of my personality, like Danny."

"Danny doesn't accept you?"

Dan stopped pacing. "I don't know."

Jazz grabbed his hand and drew Dan back to the bed. "Dan, I won't tell you what to do or what is wrong or right. I will tell you that what I am hearing is, 'Paulina does this thing that Danny doesn't.'"

Dan frowned, sitting. "Yeah..."

Jazz smiled, seeing comprehension dawn on Dan, but forged ahead anyway. "So, maybe, Paulina is making you feel these things because these are the things you wish Danny did for you and doesn't. Maybe this is something that can be solved with talking to Danny."

Dan gave an amused snort. "Sure. 'Hey, Danny. I want to bone you, but I need you to fulfill me emotionally first, so I need you to get over the fact that I like killing people. Kthnxbye.'"

"You never know," Jazz laughed. "Besides, how is he ever going to accept you if you don't talk to him?"

"He never wants to hear about that stuff," Dan replied stiffly. "He wants to forget everything that happened before I was locked in the thermos."

"You *did* try to kill him."

"I've said I'm sorry a million times, god."

Jazz paused. "Have you, really?"

Dan started. "...No, I don't actually think I have."

Jazz rolled her eyes. "Seriously? Maybe that's a good place to start."

"Why? It happened. I can't change it."

"You're remarkably thick for a 28 year old," Jazz replied. "You apologize so you let him know you value his life now. I mean, you *do* value his life now, don't you?"

Dan turned to Jazz, his expression open and blood red irises expressive. "Yes."

"Maybe Danny needs to know that; that even in your worst, you absolutely accept Danny and you value him. Maybe he even feels like a little...manipulated." Jazz said, knowing it was sort of cheating to divulge a bit of Danny had told her, but deciding that this instance called for it. "How can he know where he stands with you if you don't tell him?"

Dan's eyes narrowed.

"You talked to Danny before you came here, didn't you? He *said* something."

Jazz's face was neutral. "Hm?"

Dan glared at her, sorely tempted to shadow her. "Jazz..."

Jazz shook her head. "You know I can't—"

"Please."

Jazz's head snapped up. She stared, eyes wide, at Dan, whose face was turned away from her. Jazz leaned over a bit, but Dan continued to avoid her gaze.

"Okay," she breathed. "He may be a bit confused about you right now. He's definitely jealous of Paulina."

Dan snorted. "He's not subtle."

"And he doesn't want this to happen—whatever is between you two—because you manipulated it."

Dan chuckled bitterly. "At this point, I wish." Jazz waited. With a sigh, Dan continued. "I'll admit that I initially did this to confuse him—maybe torture him a bit. I don't ever remember any inclinations towards the male sex before my existence, after all. And, honestly, that's how Clockwork convinced me. Danny needed someone and I would need a reason to not be erased and a bit of entertainment."

Dan's smile faded, "But almost immediately, I forgot all about that. And, yes, I won't lie—I manipulated a few things so Danny would like me sooner. I intended on taking my time, but the closer we got, the less I could wait. Eventually, Danny stopped being someone I wanted to manipulate. Instead, I wanted him to be..."

"To be...?" Jazz prompted.

"To be someone who wanted me without the pretense." Dan admitted quietly. "Someone I didn't have to lie to, someone I didn't have to orchestrate into liking me."

Jazz frowned. "Like Paulina."

Dan nodded. "I *know* , okay? I know why Sam doesn't like me and why people scream when they see me and why Danny doesn't trust me." The ghost's eyes lowered. "I'm a monster. I made sure of it."

Jazz gently placed a hand on his shoulder, eyes glassy. "Dan."

Dan's brows furrowed and his hands clenched. "But even I...right?"

Jazz nodded, even though Dan never finished his sentence. Slowly, she sat up and wrapped her arms around Dan's shoulders. The

sociopath tensed, but eventually relaxed, wrapping an arm cautiously around her waist. Jazz bit her lip, keeping her tears at bay, the silence loud enough to fill the room.

But even I should be loved, right?

"They're late." Mandy said, sitting on her throne with her legs crossed casually. Grim sat beside her, in his own seat, calmly reading the newspaper.

"Maybe something came up," Grim replied.

Junior and Minnie withdrew from the doorway, where they had been peeking. Quietly, they snuck back to Junior's room. Once the door was shut, Junior threw himself on the bed, followed immediately by Minnie, who had no qualms with landing on his lap.

"Minnie, we really need to talk about boundaries," he griped.

"We have sworn our aid to them, have we not?" Minnie chirped. "And yet, here we sit. Thoroughly useless."

Junior pouted. "How are we supposed to help them when we're drilling combat into Danny's head and he's passed out by the time he leaves?"

"Perhaps this world's a hindrance upon us."

"What?"

"Dear brother, brave and strong as Hercules. Dear brother, I too can fight, when needs be. Perhaps this world's a hindrance upon us. Let's find a world not so superfluous. It's obvious they need our help, dearest. And one world allows our interference."

Junior blinked. "Wait, are you saying what I *think* you're saying?"

Minnie smiled. Junior grinned back, excitedly grabbing her shoulders.

"Pack a bag, Minnie. We're going on holiday...

To Earth."

And so time marches on...

That was brutal. Oh my god. Ow. I hope you guys enjoy, tho.

I was half dead when I finished this, so if anyone notices any mistakes, please let me know.

Smile

GUESS WHO DECIDED TO UPDATE IN LESS THAN ONE MONTH. WOOOOOOOOOOHHHHH

Thank you so much for all the lovely reviews. It's nice to know people are still reading this story.

I once made a reference to a very rude reviewer and I wanted them to fuck off. Like fanboy021898, some people apologized about being rude and that made me feel so bad because so many of you are just precious honeybuns. So, I'm posting the rude review here. As long as you're not this person, we're cool:

Guest: "'Because I have ALL THE TIME IN THE WORLD FOR THIS.' if you had all the time in the world for this where is chapter 3 i am sorry but come on already"

That review pissed me off so bad, and was the start of many reviews just saying stuff like "update already". It made me angry because I got excited for new reviews, and it was the same guest spamming me to finish the story and making me feel like everyone else had stopped reading. I'm okay dealing with the mean and nice reviews nowadays (thankfully, the mean reviews are basically nonexistent at this point). So, please, whatever you feel like sharing in your review, do not hesitate to share and don't be sorry for sharing it. I won't even ask that you be polite. I'm just grateful that people are still reading this story, so thank you. **Heart**

8

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"Okay, get off," Dan muttered. Jazz laughed and let him go, surreptitiously wiping her eyes. Heaving a sigh, Dan leaned back on his elbows, looking at the ceiling. "Well, that felt weird."

"What did?" Jazz asked.

" *Feeling* . It felt weird."

Jazz rolled her eyes. "You're going to be a lifetime of work, aren't you?"

"I believe someone once described me as incorrigible..."

Jazz snorted and flopped down beside him. "So...what now?"

Dan's face twisted. "You just do not stop, do you?"

The redhead smirked. "I believe someone once described me as incor—"

"Okay, okay, I get it. I don't really know what to do, honestly. I didn't plan to get so heavily invested myself. I just wanted *Danny* to need *me* , so that I would definitely survive."

Jazz frowned. "You...you weren't ever planning on betraying Danny, were you?"

Dan scoffed. "What? God, no. I'd just get erased. Besides, there's not much fun in a world without that kid to bully around."

"I'll take that as your misanthropic way of saying you would have missed Danny."

"Must you?"

"Hey," a voice said, prompting both their heads up. In the doorway, illuminated by the soft hallway light, stood a smiling Danny Fenton. "I know you two are thicker than thieves, but could you have this conversation in the ops center? I think I'm just gonna head to bed."

"Actually, I was just leaving, " Jazz said, pushing herself off the bed. "You two behave."

"Jazz!" Danny groaned. Dan merely smirked.

"I think it's against my DNA to behave," he replied.

Jazz rolled her eyes as she gently pushed Danny into the room and shut the door behind her. Danny stared at the door for a moment before turning back to Dan. The older ghost laid back on the bed with his eyes closed.

"Are you going to bed, too?" Danny asked, approaching quietly to put a plastic bag on his desk.

"S'prolly a good idea," Dan mumbled, his voice hoarse with sleepiness. "Today's been shit. I think we can skip Grim n' Mandy."

Danny stared down at Dan—or, rather, *Ezra* . Danny knew Dan had stamina to outlast even Pariah Dark, so being in his human form wasn't what was draining him.

Even if it's odd that he's decided to look like that all day, at home .
Danny thought.

Whatever Dan must've gone through in his head—maybe even emotionally—must be what drained him. Suddenly, Dan opened his eyes.

His *red* eyes.

Danny's brow furrowed. "Uh...your eyes are red."

Dan raised a brow in reply. "They usually are."

"Yeah, but you look like Ezra right now. Just...with red eyes. I thought your Ezra disguise had green eyes."

Dan snorted. "You think my Ezra look is just a disguise?"

Danny blinked, sitting beside Dan and taking his shoes off. "Yes?"

"Figures. No, the way I look right now is the way I'd look if I had a human half. When I 'go ghost,' I look like I usually do."

"So...Ezra, with red eyes, is how you would normally look if you had a human side, like I do?"

"I literally just said that," Dan retorted.

"Is there anything else? Something else that's different?" Danny asked, suddenly awake.

Dan shrugged, "My hair doesn't *have* to be on fire. I just do that."

Danny laughed. "You're kidding. Show me."

"No way. I don't put out on the first date."

The conversation sailed easily from there, both forgetting their fatigue as they talked into the night. Eventually, tiredness won, and they feel asleep beside each other on Danny's small bed. As customary, Maddie snuck into their room to make sure they hadn't escaped; touched, she quietly threw a blanket over Dan and Danny before she crept out.

Clockwork watched the scene passively from his tower. After a few more minutes of merely watching them sleep, Clockwork waved a hand and allowed the image to fade away. As the portal bled into another feed, Clockwork turned away and floated to his chambers.

As he expected, the children of the Castle Grim were sitting on his bed, doing their best to look innocent while inconspicuously looking around.

"Before you start calling me 'uncle Clockwork' to butter me up, don't," Clockwork said as they opened their mouths.

Junior pouted. "All right, fine. Well, you probably already know why we're here and where we're trying to go. Why not just help us?"

Minnie smiled. "Our only goal is to see two souls merge."

"You're also lucky I already know your parents won't kill me," Clockwork replied, sighing. Even knowing the future didn't help Clockwork's exasperation.

"Let's go, kids."

"Boys! You'll be late for school!" Maddie's voice called from downstairs, rousing both ghosts.

"Is it just me, or does her voice sound like screeching harpies in the morning?" Dan mumbled, turning over and stealing the blankets.

Danny snorted, but didn't disagree. He sat up and stretched as Dan continued dozing. Just before going to the bathroom, he poked the older man. "Get up. She's gonna hunt you down if you're not down for breakfast." Dan grunted, but made no move to leave the bed. Danny rolled his eyes and shoved Dan a little more forcefully. "We can't skip school, you know. We already skipped yesterday, basically."

Dan gave him a one-fingered salute in response. Despite himself, Danny could feel his eyebrow twitch in irritation at Dan's surprising lethargy. Just as he was about to throw an ecto-blast at Dan, though, Danny's eyes widened.

If we go to school, he thought, he'll talk to Paulina. If we skip, we'll spend the whole day together... But if we skip again today, they'll definitely call mom. I guess our clones could go, but then part of Dan will still hang with Paulina.

What kind of excuse could I use to skip school today?

Danny stood there, staring at Dan—intensely enough to rouse the older ghost. Mouth set in a scowl, Dan turned over to glare at Danny. His eyebrows shot up, though, when Danny *flickered*. Dan blinked his eyes, wondering what could have happened to make it seem as if Danny's entire body literally blinked and disappeared for a second. Confused, he opened his mouth to ask.

Suddenly, red mist seeped out of Dan's nose and Maddie's shrill scream tore through the house; Dan and Danny immediately jumped to attention, changed forms, and phased through the floor. Both ghosts appeared in front of Maddie, glowing green hands raised in an identical pose.

"What's wrong, mom?" Danny asked.

Maddie, who was clutching her chest, pointed under the kitchen table mutely. Nodding to each other, Danny floated closer to his mother while Dan floated closer to the table to investigate. Once he

saw what had caused the scream, he heaved a great sigh. As he changed back to Ezra and straightened, Jazz and Jack ran into the kitchen, immediately asking Maddie if she was okay.

"Jesus fuck," Dan groaned over their frantic questions. "You're not gonna believe this."

Danny raised a brow, lowering his hand slightly. "Don't tell me it's just the Box Ghost."

"I wouldn't scream if it was just the Box Ghost!" Maddie said, petulant.

Dan rolled his eyes. " *He'd* be less troublesome." With that, he reached under the table and dragged out a small skeletal boy and a patched-together girl.

"Danny!" they cheered simultaneously.

"Junior! Minnie!" Danny greeted. "What are you two doing here?"

"Y-You know these two?" Maddie asked. "They just appeared in the kitchen all of a sudden. I usually don't freak out easily, but they look like children..."

"They are children," Dan replied, eyes narrowed and focused on Danny. "They're the children of some friends of Clockwork's. We see them sometimes when we see Clockwork."

"What are you talk—" Junior started, but swiftly quieted under Dan's look. Jazz crossed her arms and gave both Dan and Danny an incredulous look, but Jack and Maddie were easily convinced.

"So, they're really children? Why do they look like that? They don't register as ghosts," Maddie commented, getting closer to examine them. Junior blushed under the scrutiny and Minnie smiled prettily.

"They're not ghosts," Danny said, steadfastly ignoring the look of growing confusion on Dan's face. "They're undead, but not ghosts or

zombies. I don't really know how to explain what they are."

"If I may say my piece," Minnie interjected, "we simply are. Father mine is the bane of living things; Mother, the bane of all things alive and dead. We, the children of Evil and Grim, seek your hospitality and kindness. Think not of our sires, 'stead think of our hearts. Children are we still, despite how we seem. Not alive, nor dead, nor common beings, we babes crave the attention of our friends."

Junior rolled his eye when no one responded. "She said we're otherworldly beings and we just wanted to play with Dan and Danny."

"Oh!" Maddie chuckled, if somewhat uneasily, "I think I heard quite a bit more in there, but if that's the gist..."

"So!" Jack boomed. "How did you little tykes get here from your home? Do you live in the ghost zone?"

"No," Junior replied before either ghost could stop him. "We live in hell with our parents."

"From the deepest pits, aflame with anguish, we came o'er the ghost zone...though secretly." Minnie added.

"Secretly?" Dan perked. "You mean Grim and Mandy *don't* know where you are?"

"Nope!" Junior cheerily said. "And we can't go back until tomorrow, because there's this huge meeting between all the leaders of the Underworld, so all the transport is tied up."

Maddie frowned. "So...if I'm understanding this correctly, you came all the way from *hell* to spend time with Dan and Danny, and you can't go back until tomorrow because of some sort of...traffic jam?"

"Essentially," Dan sighed. "What should we do?"

Danny shrugged. "Only one thing, really. Spend the day with them. They did come all this way to see us."

Jazz hesitated, but eventually nodded. "I agree. It's the most sensible idea. You guys won't miss much in school that you can't easily recover over the weekend."

Maddie blinked. "Jazz, I do believe that's the first time I've ever heard you suggest that anyone skip school."

"College has softened me, mom," the redhead grinned.

Danny tried to hide his smile. "Uh, mom, you should know that Dan and I skipped yesterday, because we had some issues with a ghost and because we had to talk to Sam."

"Sam?" she asked.

"What's wrong with Sam?" Jack asked. "I thought all of you were squared away."

"We are now," Danny nodded, smiling. "I promise. But we did take the whole day, so I just wanted to tell you before you got a call."

Maddie sighed. "Well, all right. I suppose it's fine. Jack and I have to go for a one-day conference today, though, so will you kids be all right by yourselves?"

Dan rolled his eyes, deadpan. "I'm 28, mother."

"I'm 20, mom," Jazz added with a fond smile.

"I'm a teenage ghost hero," Danny grinned, cheeky.

"We frequently have to hunt for our food," Junior supplied, Minnie nodding in agreement.

Maddie shook her head. "Let's go, Jack. They'll be fine."

As his parents left and Jazz turned to the kitchen to make breakfast, Danny smiled happily at the two kids engaging Dan. For the moment, they definitely were not going to school.

"Has anyone seen Danny?" Kwan asked as he approached Tucker and Sam. Dash walked by them determinedly. Sam shook her head, frowning, and Tucker sighed exasperatedly while glancing at his phone. "He's not coming today," Tucker replied as they watched the blond stomp away. "He's got some visitors from out of town who can only stay for today, so he and Dan decided to stay home."

"Dan, too?" a voice asked, and they turned to face Paulina. Sam's face flushed and her hands clenched as she unconsciously prepared herself, but Paulina seemed uninterested in her. "Did you say Ezra is staying home, too? He doesn't have a cellphone yet, so I can't text him or anything."

Sam sighed, deigning to answer. "Yeah, D—" Suddenly, her eyes widened. "Wait...what did you say?"

Paulina looked at her strangely. "I asked if Ezra was staying home today."

"No, before that. You said another name," Sam replied. "What name did you say?"

Paulina rolled her eyes and opened her mouth to answer, but no sound escaped. Instead, her face lost all color and her head shook wordlessly.

"Paulina, what was that name you just said?" Sam asked again.

"N-Nothing! Forget it," she said hurriedly and ran to Star. Kwan looked between Sam and Paulina, scratching his head.

"What just happened?" Kwan finally asked. "Why were you so set on having Paulina repeat Dan's name?"

"That's just it, Kwan," Sam muttered. "Paulina shouldn't have any idea who we're talking about when we say the name 'Dan.' But, not only did she *not* ask who 'Dan' was, she even knew that his other

name is 'Ezra.' It seems like Paulina knows that Dan and Ezra are the same person and, if she knows that, she knows exactly *who* Dan is." Sam's purple eyes widened in understanding. "Now it makes sense! Why she was so gung-ho about defending Dan yesterday! She knows who he is and she even knows what's going on!"

Kwan tilted his head, looking at where Paulina and Star were talking quietly. "Really? I know Danny and Paulina might have hung out a little because Dan and Paulina are close, but I don't see him revealing all this stuff to her out of the blue."

"Maybe it wasn't Danny," she offered. "You *did* say Dan and Paulina are getting close; maybe Dan told Paulina himself." Sam frowned. "I don't know how I feel about that. On one hand, it sort of proves that Dan really is rehabilitating and choosing his own friends. On the other hand, why confide in Paulina? Dan doesn't seem like the kind of guy who doesn't make sure everything goes his way. In what way does Paulina benefit whatever plans Dan's got?"

Tucker rolled his eyes, scoffing. "We've been over this. Dan has no other agenda than *surviving*, Sam. Maybe Dan realizes he can't suffocate Danny all the time and he decided to make a friend on his own."

"Maybe," Sam conceded.

As Sam and Kwan continued talking about the possibilities, Tucker followed them quietly into the school, hoping they wouldn't dig deeper than that. While Tucker wasn't aware how much Paulina knew regarding the matter, Tucker didn't want Kwan and Sam realizing how *Danny* felt about Dan until Danny was ready to talk.

Besides, it struck Tucker as odd that Paulina was only concerned with *Dan's* whereabouts and not *Danny's*. He wasn't exactly an expert on girls, but that screamed "I have a crush on this guy!"

What have you gotten yourself into, Dan? Danny? Tucker wondered.

Not two hours had passed, and Danny was already regretting allowing the children of the Castle Grim to stay with him. Junior was overly excited and demanded that everything in the house be explained to him. Minnie, who usually latched onto the Junior with a vice grip, apparently decided to allow her brother to enjoy himself and sat quietly on the couch with Jazz and Dan. Glaring at them from across the room as Junior dragged Danny to another part of the house, Danny fervently hoped Minnie was at least asking uncomfortable questions.

"Dan, (second) evilest among evil; please, do tell how you will gain Danny's love?"

Dan's eyebrow twitched and he noticed Jazz valiantly trying to keep a straight face.

And failing.

"Did you two just come up here to try and shove Danny and I together?" he eventually asked.

Minnie nodded. "Perhaps too expedient on our behalf, but we see two souls not yet become one. We worried perhaps the battle was lost, yea, as I sensed your heart drifting away."

"And having Danny act as Junior's tour guide was part of the plan?"

Minnie had the grace to blush. "I admit, my love's excitement o'erflows. Allow him his fill, for this chance is rare. He will remember our mission, I'm sure, as your happiness is what he hopes for."

"Do you always talk like that?" Jazz asked. Minnie and Dan nodded.

"And what do you mean my heart is drifting?" Dan demanded. "One: I don't have a heart. Two: even if I did, it's not drifting."

"No fair maiden has caught your eye, Phantom?" Minnie asked shrewdly, "Images I see say differently. Yea, the phantom asks the

maiden to sing. This young maiden, with eyes like the ocean; with hair, black and smooth as the onyx stone; and skin, a seductive, caramel brown, has swayed the attentions of the phantom, and lures the phantom from his destiny."

"Goddammit," he growled. "Can't a guy live his life without everyone suddenly knowing his every secret?"

Jazz chuckled. "Apparently not. My advice still holds."

"Talk to him?"

"It is wise advice, to speak to Danny. The maiden sings, but songs paint mirages. Banish the illusions this maiden sings, though she herself is unaware of them. Instead, use words to face reality. You'll find a sweeter world outside of dreams."

Dan's eyebrows drew together. "I'm going to ignore all that. Do tell: how did you two get here?"

"We flew through the ghost zone, excitedly," Minnie replied.

"No, I know that part. The thing is, I know how hard it is to travel between worlds. I can make my own ghost portals, but it generally drains a lot of energy and I prefer not to. So, how did two little kids—strong though you may be—make it through hell, the ghost zone, and to earth in one piece?"

"Clockwork did show us the way, my dear friend."

Dan frowned. "Well, that explains why my ghost sense went off when you guys arrived, but that's only half my question. Clockwork could get you from the ghost zone to here, but how did you get from hell to the ghost zone?"

Jazz tilted her head. "Is it really that difficult a passage?"

Dan nodded. "Without the Doom Train or whatever, traveling outside of worlds is heavily regulated and nearly impossible. In fact, with

these two breaking the rules coming here without permission, Walker should have stopped them as soon as they got into the ghost zone." Dan turned back to Minnie. "So spill, little girl. What really happened?"

Minnie frowned. "Truly, honestly, I have no answer. T'was easy to travel to the ghost zone. No guard, no sentry, no protector there; once, at home, then suddenly with Clockwork. It was nearly instantaneous, friend. Clockwork served escort the rest of the way."

"Okay, but how did you even make it all the way to Clockwork?"

"More of the same, I will tell you Phantom. Once, at home, then suddenly with Clockwork. It was nearly instantaneous, friend."

Jazz frowned. "She's right, this is getting nowhere."

"No," Dan held his chin, staring at the wall in front of him. "No, it means someone helped them without their knowledge. And, even though it usually takes days to travel, these kids traveled instantly. Someone already planned their coming here in advance and prepared for it. And there's only really one person—or ghost—who could do that."

"Clockwork," Jazz surmised.

Dan nodded. "He brought them here today for some reason, but for the death of me, I can't figure out why."

Dan watched as Danny chased Junior through the kitchen again, his eyes narrowed in suspicion. As Junior passed by the living room, Minnie jumped off the couch and latched onto him, stopping the boy from running further.

"Dear brother, I believe we are waylaid; we came here for a task—did you forget? Two souls have not yet become one, brother. Was it not us to be Cupid's arrows? Let us guide them true, let us not waver."

Junior blushed, nodding. "Sorry, Minnie. I was just so excited, but you're right."

The girl smiled and cuddled closer to her brother, forgiving him with a nod. Dan rolled his eyes as Jazz cooed at them. As one, the group turned to face Danny, groaning as he crawled into the room. "Is he finally done?"

Dan snorted. "Yeah, he's done. You tagging out?"

In response, Danny weakly lifted his arm and tapped Dan's hand.

Jazz laughed. "Poor Danny. Though, they're only here for a day. Maybe we should take the time to show them the outside world as well. Obviously Danny's out though; think you can handle it, Dan?"

Scoffing, Dan stood and reconstructed "Ezra," with green eyes and a sportier outfit. "I'll show you what real stamina is. I'm sure Junior would love to see what a skate rink looks like."

"OHMYGODYES!" Junior immediately cheered. Minnie frowned, eyebrows creased in worry.

"Dan—" she began, but Jazz shook her head, seizing the opportunity.

"That sounds good. Danny and I could use the time to catch up. We spent all day helping Sam yesterday, and I'm here for a few days. Go have fun."

Dan raised an incredulous eyebrow. "Fun? Right. Anyway, there's nothing we can do about Minnie, but you should change the way you look, Junior."

With an excited nod, Junior's nergal powers manifested and he looked like a normal boy, albeit with one eye. Waving a hand at the Fenton siblings, Dan walked out with the children, shooting Jazz a

look as he left. Once the door closed, Danny shot up and sat beside Jazz.

"What was that?" he asked.

"Probably wondering why I'm forcing him to go out with the kids when he knows you and I can talk whenever."

"Ah. Why did you make him go out?"

"I'll answer that when you tell me why Clockwork brought those kids over here."

Danny flushed. "Figured that out?"

"Dan did. Judging by your expression, you know why."

Danny grinned. "Well..."

"Boys! You'll be late for school!" Maddie's voice called from downstairs, rousing both ghosts.

"Is it just me, or does her voice sound like screeching harpies in the morning?" Dan mumbled, turning over and stealing the blankets.

Danny snorted, but didn't disagree. He sat up and stretched as Dan continued dozing. Just before going to the bathroom, he poked the older man. "Get up. She's gonna hunt you down if you're not down for breakfast." Dan grunted, but made no move to leave the bed. Danny rolled his eyes and shoved Dan a little more forcefully. "We can't skip school, you know. We already skipped yesterday, basically."

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What kind of excuse could I use to skip school today?

"I don't know," a voice suddenly said. "What excuse *could* you use?"

Danny whipped around, taking note of the stillness of the room, and smiled at Clockwork. "The kind of excuse where I couldn't leave the house but my parents wouldn't want to stick around."

"Any ideas?"

"Junior always *did* want to see the human realm, didn't he? If he and Minnie came over, Dan and I could babysit. And since they're visiting all the way from hell, it'd be rude for us to go to school and leave them home with mom, who has plans today."

"I suppose I could get the kids over here, if need be. I'm sure Grim and Mandy would appreciate the quiet. Don't ask me to reset time when you regret it, though."

Danny laughed. "Thanks, Clockwork."

"Well, get back to where you were standing. Dan will be suspicious enough without you suddenly standing in a different part of the room."

Nodding, Danny stood back where he was, staring at Dan, and time resumed. Dan, who had turned over, blinked in surprise. Danny hid a smirk as Dan opened his mouth to ask what happened. Suddenly, Maddie's shrill scream tore through the house.

Jazz laughed incredulously. "Really? *You* planned this? That's kind of surprising. I would've expected something like this from Dan,

actually."

Danny shrugged. "I needed a way for him to get away from Paulina for a bit, so I wouldn't worry about him while I figure myself out. I did admittedly see us spending the day together, though."

Jazz frowned. "You two won't solve all this in a day. And you still have to read that journal, Danny."

Danny sighed heavily. "Right. Will you stay here and warn me if they get back before I'm done?"

Jazz nodded; solemnly, she watched her brother trudge upstairs towards his room. Once she heard his door closed, she slouched on the couch, exhausted. She knew her reaction was extreme, but warranted, and worried at how Danny would react. She worried at how Danny would behave around Dan afterwards.

Mostly, she worried about how Dan and Danny would handle telling others of their relationship. As it was, Maddie saw them as brothers; Jack saw them as friends or roommates; and Danny's friends, with the exception of Tucker, saw Dan as evil incarnate.

"Speaking of," Jazz muttered, pulling out her phone, "Tucker seemed to know quite a bit..." She sent a quick text to Tucker, asking him to pass by the house later. It seemed wise to have some supportive back up, in case Danny—or Dan—needed it.

Paulina flipped her hair nervously as she waited for Star to join her at their regular spot near the tree. After her slip earlier, the Latina had been avoiding Team Phantom like the plague. Unfortunately, that didn't occupy her enough to not berate herself for her mistake, and she'd been distracted all day.

"This is all Ezra's fault..." she pouted.

"Like, what is?" Star asked, sitting beside Paulina.

Paulina bit her lip. As much as she wanted someone to talk to, she couldn't reveal Dan's secret to Star.

"I had a small spat with Team Phantom again because I asked where Ezra was, that's all. It's his fault for being absent."

Star gave her a deadpan look. "You're obviously lying, girl, but I'll let it go. You'll tell me eventually."

Paulina rolled her eyes, but sent her friend a grateful smile. They started eating and talking about other things, until they were interrupted by a looming shadow.

"Ladies?" Tucker smiled. "Mind if I join you?"

Star and Paulina glanced at each other. "Why?" they asked in unison.

"Well, the excuse is that I join you to hit on Star, Star gets insulted and leaves, and then I get to talk to Paulina about something private."

Star raised her eyebrows. "You two share a secret? So unfair."

"It's about a mutual friend. Big, dark hair, green eyes?" Tucker shrugged.

Paulina smiled ruefully. "Sorry, Star. If it were my secret to tell..."

Star groaned, but stood up and dutifully slapped Tucker. "Whatever, you two. Tell me later, when he's cool with it." Efficiently, Star collected her possessions and walked away. Tucker rubbed his cheek, wincing.

"She did *not* have to slap that hard."

Paulina laughed. "Your friends wouldn't believe you without the mark to prove it."

"Fair enough. So, I think you've figured out that we know you know about Dan and Ezra." Paulina nodded. Tucker sighed, continuing. "What Sam, Kwan, and Dash don't know is that I'm cool with Danny again and he gave me all the deets regarding you and Dan. So, I already knew that you knew, but I don't know to what extent."

Paulina raised a brow. "So, you want to...what? Compare notes?"

Tucker sat down. "In a sense. Danny told me he and Dan told you the truth about Dan and his purpose. Now, the purpose Danny was originally told and the purpose Dan intends on fulfilling—as far as I understand—are not the same. Is that what you're understanding?"

Paulina puckered her lips. "Yes. Ezra isn't subtle about his intentions and he confirmed them to me. I don't know how aware Danny is of it, but Ezra is definitely playing on another field."

"My question is, if Dan let you know where he wants to take his relationship with Danny, why are you two suddenly so close?" Tucker leaned against the tree, skeptical brow raised. "I may not know the mysterious ways of women, but you're acting like you two are seconds away from going steady."

Paulina blushed and looked away, silent.

"Paulina, please. I know the others haven't always been really open to listening to you, but I'm willing to listen and I won't judge you. I just want the best for Danny."

She huffed. "I want the best for Danny, too, you know. We really bonded. He and I are very similar, actually."

"That doesn't answer my question, though," Tucker pointed out.

The Latina groaned. "Okay, fine. *Maybe* there was something between Ezra and I. *Maybe* I want that to happen. *Maybe* Danny doesn't see what's right in front of him, but *I* did."

Tucker shook his head, uncomprehending.

"Look, I know that Danny maybe has feelings for Ezra and I know that Ezra was clearly trying to win him over. I also know that Ezra *has* to find some way to get Danny attached to him, or Ezra could end up erased. As much as I love Danny, Ezra's behavior seems more like he was thinking about his survival than actually wanting Danny to like him back. But Ezra is real with me. We talk and we get each other. There are no pretenses and no manipulations and no *reasons* that we should be together. If we're together, it's just because we *want* to be, not because Ezra will die or whatever if we don't get along."

Tucker frowned. "There's still a lot about Dan that you don't know, Paulina. You don't know what he's done in the past and who he's hurt. You don't know who he was willing to hurt, just to secure his future."

Paulina scowled. "So? Are you saying you wouldn't do whatever you could to make sure you still existed? That you wouldn't fight your hardest if someone came around threatening your very being? Anyone would!"

"You're not listening to me, Paulina. He's killed people *for fun* ."

Paulina paled, but her eyebrows were still drawn together stubbornly. "I don't care. That was the Ezra before. This Ezra gets the opportunity to recreate himself however he wants. He doesn't *have* to act a certain way anymore because his future and his life don't depend on it."

"And if he still likes killing people for fun? Even now?"

"But he doesn't! I haven't heard of any random killing sprees, have you? He finds other outlets, because he recognizes that his killing before was some sort of coping mechanism he needed when he was alone! He's not alone now. He has Danny and he has *me* ."

Tucker huffed out a laugh. "Wow. I heard about the math thing, but are you sure you shouldn't be a politician? You can out-debate anyone."

The dark hair girl smirked and flipped her hair over her shoulder. "I'm a genius, thanks."

Tucker smiled back, wryly. "Then, how do you justify taking Dan from Danny, right as Danny's figuring out his feelings?"

Paulina sucked in a breath and lifted her chin. Tucker waited patiently for her answer, even as the bell rang and the other students walked back to class. Dash passed them by, giving them an odd look. Still, Paulina didn't answer.

"You don't have anything, do you?" Tucker finally asked. "You can't justify it."

"He doesn't have dibs on Ezra, Tucker."

"No," Tucker nodded. "But he's sacrificed enough for us, hasn't he? Should he have this one thing?"

Paulina's fist hit the ground, making Tucker jump. The girl drew her legs up and hid her face behind a curtain of hair as she rested her forehead on her knees. She shuddered.

"I know."

Tucker nodded, moving to stand, but Paulina's watery voice stopped him.

"But hasn't Ezra suffered enough, too? Doesn't he deserve to be with someone just because he likes them? Not because his entire existence depends on it? As alone as he was, and as many enemies as he made, he always had to watch his back and doubt the intentions of others. How can he trust Danny's intentions? Danny

could choose to erase him at any time, for any reason. But, with me, Ezra will never have to worry about my intentions."

Tucker tilted his head. "How do you figure?"

The girl lifted her head, blue eyes misty, but her caramel cheeks were still dry. "Because I don't have any leverage on him. I never will, until he trusts me with it. Danny's *a/ways* going to have leverage on Ezra. Ezra never had a choice in that."

Tucker let out a long breath, closing his eyes.

"Maybe Dan never had the choice before, but he's got the choice now. And maybe you're right, that I shouldn't ask you to back off for Danny's sake. Maybe that's a choice Dan's got to make on his own. But...can I trust you to respect his choice if it's not you?"

The Latina laughed. "It won't be me. I know it won't."

"What?" Tucker asked, sitting down again. "I don't understand. If you know it won't be you, why are you trying? And why are you so sure it won't be you?"

"Because if I don't try, I'll look back and hate myself for it. Just because something seems impossible, it shouldn't mean you shouldn't strive for it. I spent years doing that, Tucker, because I was so scared to be me. I'm not allowing myself to make the same mistake over and over.

And I know it won't be me because I know that Danny will get his head out of his ass and realize what I realized about Ezra. And Ezra needs Danny, even if I think their whole situation is unfair."

Tucker smiled sadly. "You know, Paulina. I think you're one of the coolest girls I've ever known."

Paulina snorted. "I'm obviously amazing."

"Obviously."

They smiled at each other, but Paulina's slid off her face. Tucker attempted to keep smiling in the face of Paulina's open vulnerability. She sighed heavily.

"I just want them to be happy."

Danny stared solemnly at the journal in his hands. It'd been twenty minutes since he'd dug the book out from under his bed, but he still hadn't opened it. He knew that his time was limited and he knew he'd want to process his emotions away from Dan first, but he couldn't bring himself to open it just yet.

Despite the feelings he'd been harboring for Dan, Danny wasn't sure he could open the book and completely upend his life. He wasn't sure he was ready to suddenly find out he was head over heels in love with Dan and had asked for those memories to be erased. He wasn't sure how he would be able to act if he really did find out he was in love.

Danny in love was never a great thing, because Danny had a tendency to act like an idiot around the person he loved. He'd done it with Sam—making constant mistakes on the field, bending to most of her whims, forgiving her transgressions easily—and he feared that Dan, though reformed, would only take advantage of that. Because Jazz was right; Dan was still a sociopathic, homicidal serial killer and that hadn't gone away just because of a few weeks together. What would Dan manipulate Danny into doing, just for his own satisfaction?

Danny sighed, glancing at the bag that sat innocently on his nightstand. Inside was a piece of Attila the Hun's sword, The Sword of Mars, that Danny *borrowed*. Shaking his head, Danny realized the lengths he'd already gone to for Dan's happiness, and he only felt a mild, if possessive attraction to Dan. Would it be worse if Danny was in love with him? Or, if he could manipulate Dan as well as Dan manipulated Danny, would it even out?

What does Dan need? Danny asked himself, frowning. Clearly, as Jazz pointed out, it was just acceptance. The ability to listen to Dan completely without judging his sins. Danny, who's moral compass may have swayed but always remained true when it mattered, wasn't sure he could listen impartially to Dan's past actions.

Danny shook his head. *But he's not asking that I listen to the stuff he's done. He wants someone to accept him and his feelings. For someone to tell him...*

Danny's eyes widened, a sense of déjà vu overwhelming him. *He's waiting for someone to tell him he's not crazy.*

Something Paulina managed in all of one conversation, apparently.

And Danny, who definitely knew Dan much more intimately than Paulina ever would, could do the same. But he needed to know how he felt first. Determination renewed, Danny looked at the journal still in his grip and, with a deep sigh, opened it.

And, without even having to read a single entry, Danny remembered *everything* .

Every agonized moment he spent wondering if he was *insane* to consider this attraction; every second he *despised* himself for wanting this; every day he wasted with Ember, convincing himself that he needed a change of scenery; every single fight with Sam, claiming he was tired of her overbearing nature, while hating himself because he really craved someone else; every minute he counted, trying to keep himself from going to Clockwork's tower and releasing Dan. All those feelings he'd forced himself to forget, that were locked away, came rushing back.

But it wasn't love.

Gasping, Danny dropped the book and clutched at his head, keeping himself upright by quickly grabbing the bedpost. The feelings that

rushed him were real, were definite, and were deep, but it wasn't love.

"Thank God," Danny muttered.

That it wasn't love meant Danny wouldn't have to have opened a book to have that feeling for Dan. Besides, even with how deep his affections for Dan were—especially now that he remembered how those feelings manifested—Danny didn't feel ready to ever call it love. But, those feelings of affection were real, and they were not the manipulation of Dan, who wasn't around when these feelings began. Instead, it was just as Dan himself had said before: these feelings were likely a by-product of the incompleteness they both felt when they were around each other, but these feelings were not manufactured by Dan's need to survive or Danny's need to have someone by him.

Danny let himself fall on the bed, covering his eyes with his arm. Breathing deeply, he phased through his bed and his floor, landing on the floor right in front of Jazz. The redhead blinked and put her book aside, staring at her brother. After a few moments, Danny opened his mouth.

"I *like* him," he said.

Jazz nodded, silent.

"Like, a *lot* . I genuinely like this guy, despite what he's done. I had dreams of this guy killing me and everyone I loved, and I still want to know what having sex with him is like. Am I insane?"

Jazz shook her head. "No, Danny. You're not insane."

"You don't believe that."

Jazz shrugged. "I try to, but then again, I'm not about to become the master of time and I don't have ghost powers and I don't have a person who has the other half of me within them. So, in my boring-

life context, that sounds pretty crazy. But I feel like someone who understands you and has been through the same, extreme circumstances would tell you that you're not crazy."

"How do I even approach him with this?"

Jazz tilted her head. "Did you figure out what Dan needs?"

"The same thing I need: he needs someone to understand him."

"Can you provide that?"

Danny snorted. "God, yes. I definitely get the crazy bastard."

Jazz chuckled. "Then, it sounds like you guys will be fine. I don't know how to start this conversation, but probably something like: 'Dan, can we talk?' is a good place."

Danny sat up on his elbows, smiling at his sister. Jazz's eyes widened: Danny's shoulders were far looser than she'd seen in days; his smile was clear and reached his eyes, making them shine a bright, crystalline blue. Danny's general aura exuded calm and acceptance, instead of the manic energy she felt had begun to overtake him.

"That's probably a good place, yeah," Danny responded. "Thanks, Jazz. You are, without a doubt, the best."

The redhead smiled, crossing her arms and legs and sitting back. "I try, little brother."

The door slammed open, and the Fenton siblings turned to the commotion, watching Dan practically haul Junior and Minnie into the home. "We are fucking *done* at the skate park, you fucking brats! I can't believe you almost let your nergal eat someone, you little shit!"

"But I want to skate more!" Junior protested, vehemently wielding a skateboard as his nergal tentacles grasped at the door frame. Minnie, to her credit, was attempting to dislodge Junior's hold. Dan

growled, his aura gathering around him in a familiar white ring. The ring dissipated, however, as Danny's hand fell onto Dan's shoulder. Dan blinked, turning to face Danny, his hold on Junior still as strong as Junior's hold on the frame. Curious, Jazz, Junior, and Minnie all also watched Danny.

"Danny?" Dan asked. "You feeling all right? You seem kind of... mellow. You haven't been drinking, have you?"

Danny chuckled. "No, not quite. But, I was hoping you'd leave Junior and Minnie to Jazz."

Jazz groaned and slouched in her seat, but was largely ignored by the ghosts. Junior's hold was steadfast, even as his attention was riveted on the ghosts, but Minnie grinned excitedly.

"Dear brother, you must cease this game post haste. Cupid has drawn his weapons and aimed true. I the arrow, you the bow, claim success! In life, in death, two souls will become one!"

"Wait, what?" Junior said, withdrawing his nergal powers entirely. With a cheer, Minnie grabbed his arm and dragged him to Jazz, to Dan's bewilderment.

"Wait, *what*?" Dan parroted, looking between the children and Danny. Danny merely smiled.

"Dan, can we talk?"

Red, sunken eyes fixated on the blue planet before them, drinking in the long-denied beauty. A toothy smile spread across Vlad's face as he finally beheld his home for the first time in three years. Though the trip was arduous, it was well worth it.

Soon, Vlad would be able to take his family— save his family—from the clutches of Jack Fenton. But, even as Vlad craved to return straight home to Amityville, he knew he would have to make

preparations. Vlad cracked his neck and rubbed his arms, attempting to soothe the itch beneath his skin that demanded he rush to Fentonworks and immediately kill Jack. Though satisfying, simply killing Jack would not help Vlad achieve his ultimate goal.

No, Vlad realized; he still had to make preparations. His family was likely still brainwashed, and he would need a plan to break Jack's hold on them. His human half was weak and needed nourishment, and obviously Vlad had to attend to those needs as soon as he returned. Smiling gleefully, Vlad flew slowly but steadily to his abandoned mansion, where the prototype for his ghost gauntlets were.

Indeed—Vlad would soon *deal* with his human weakness, and then he would be ready to save Maddie, Jazz, and especially Danny.

"I'm almost there, my dears," he whispered, voice hoarse. "I'll save you all and then we can live together, forever..."

In death."

And so time marches on...

Fuck yeah! BAM.

To be fair, this chapter basically wrote itself. It's about to get good, kids. Stick with me a little longer.

Decide

So, this note started off much more happily, but the chapter somehow got erased despite my saving it. I started the chapter literally the day after I posted Chapter 10, so when it got erased, I just wasn't motivated to start again, despite my one month update goal.

Still, you all have no idea how much I appreciate your reviews. It took a few tries, but I finally got this chapter where I wanted it.

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In death."

And so time marches on...

Dan and Danny sat on Danny's bed, facing each other. Both ghosts were stone faced and silent. Dan tapped his fingers on his knee to the beat of "Every Little Thing She Does Is Magic".

So far, Dan had tapped at least four songs from The Police alone.

"Goddamn it, Danny, are we going to sit here staring at each other all night or are you going to actually talk to me?" Dan finally demanded.

Danny actually laughed. "Sorry, Dan. I just don't know what to say."

Dan rolled his eyes. "Well, I can't help you with that."

Danny's eyes narrowed. "Actually...maybe you can." At Dan's raised eyebrow, Danny continued. "Tell me everything you've done to manipulate me, up to this point."

Danny watched, fascinated, as Dan tensed without visibly moving. Somehow, Dan's very aura seemed to withdraw; his tapping continued, but was more staccato; and his eyes were more closed off than Danny had ever seen.

"What do you mean?" Dan asked very carefully.

"I won't judge you," Danny replied. "And I promise that I will try to not react on my anger, if I get angry. I promise to hear you out completely first. But I want you to tell me what you've done to manipulate me."

"Why?"

Danny smiled ruefully. "We can't be a very good team if you're holding the leash and dragging me along, Dan."

Dan tilted his head. "We're a team?"

Danny nodded. "We're going to be. One way or another, I know you're the person I want to keep with me when I become master of time. But first, I need to trust you." Danny paused, looking around the room. "I told you I was starting to trust you—that I wanted to trust you. I still do. It feels crazy that it hasn't even been a month and I want to trust you. But, in about two weeks, you've also helped me increase my stamina eight-fold; you're the only person privy to *all* my secrets; you're the only person I feel like I could spent millennia with and not go crazy.

And, despite the collar around your neck, I haven't seen you try anything. You get along so well with Jazz, it's like you two have always been siblings. You and Paulina have such a close friendship,

and I can see there's nothing there that's been manipulated or has an end game—you two are just good friends because you want to be, even if it pisses me off. I don't know if you're conscious of this, but you're taking steps to *actually* change. Some part of me even thinks that, machinations and all, you're not planning anything *bad* .

But for me to be sure of that, I need you to tell me."

Dan let out a long breath. "Wow. Okay."

"I know it's a lot to take in," Danny said.

The older ghost nodded.

"Oh, and before I forget..." Danny trailed off, reaching for the bag on his nightstand and handing it to Dan.

Dan's eyes widened as he withdrew the piece of the sword, his breath leaving him in a ragged rush. "Holy shit."

Danny grinned wide. "Yeah."

"Holy *shit* ."

" *Yeah*. "

"This is a piece of the fucking *Sword of Mars* , Danny."

"Yeah, it is."

Dan shook his head and turned incredulous eyes on Danny. "What the hell is this *for* ?"

Danny shrugged. "I'm a bit late, but you've been here more than a week. I thought we should celebrate your anniversary for being so good."

Dan pursed his lips. "I don't know if I should be thankful, make fun of you for celebrating a week-long anniversary like a grade schooler, or

be insulted because you make me sound like a dog."

Danny smiled. "Or, you could appreciate the gift and use that as an incentive to be honest with me."

Dan laughed. "Oh? And *I'm* the manipulative one? How about you tell me what else *you* manipulated, Danny-boy?" To Dan's surprise, Danny's cheeks flushed a deep red. "Wait. *Did* you orchestrate something else?"

Danny fidgeted. "I may or may not be the reason that Junior and Minnie are here today."

"...What."

Danny waved his hands in front of him. "Never mind! I'll explain later. *You* tell me what *you've* orchestrated first."

Dan snorted, shaking his head. "Wow. And I thought I was the mastermind here. All right."

Danny sat, silent, as Dan explained his plans to acclimate Danny to his touch; plans to isolate Danny and keep him dependent on Dan before Danny's friends came back; how Dan had planned on taking at least six months to slowly force Danny to question his sexuality; and even how Dan had planned their conversation to go when Danny finally confronted Dan in regards to his feelings. Dan stood and paced, gesturing with his hands occasionally, as he explained in detail the dates, the times, the people involved in his careful planning.

When Dan sat back down, Danny breathed out a long sigh.

"So," Danny said, "at any point, were you planning on betraying me?"

"No," Dan answered. "I didn't really want to kill you. It's not necessary for my survival anymore, since I live outside of my original

time line."

"Is that the only reason you weren't going to kill me?"

Dan rolled his eyes. "I feel like you're fishing for something. Anyway, no, that wasn't the only reason. I recognized that I'd go insane without you again, so it makes more sense to make whatever this is work. And you're not the annoying brat you were when we first met; I feel like I can deal with you for a few millennia. Maybe two."

Danny smiled. "Gee, thanks. But, wow. You literally had a twenty-six step plan, spanning six months, to win me over?"

Dan shrugged. "What can I say? I'm a Slytherin."

"Of course you are," Danny laughed. "I don't think anyone's ever put that much effort for me before."

Dan raised his brows. "Yeah, real romantic of me."

"Yes, I realize," Danny sighed, "That I'm even *thinking* that way says a lot about how much of your manipulations have already succeeded." Dan smirked. "And the fact that we're having this conversation two weeks in instead of six months from now says a lot about how much your plans have failed."

Dan scowled. "Well, that was uncalled for."

"So, what caused your plans to accelerate to light speed?"

Dan relaxed, sitting back against the headboard. "I don't know. I knew to use your jealousy to my advantage, but I didn't expect someone like Paulina. And I feel like I'm not the only one playing on this field towards my endgame. Someone else is helping me, without my knowledge."

"Clockwork," Danny supplied. "He helped me with my own plans for today."

"Mind explaining that to me? *You* invited Junior and Minnie?"

Danny had the grace to look sheepish. "I *really* didn't expect they'd be this much trouble. But yeah, I needed a reason for us to stay home." Dan raised a single brow. "Okay, fine, I needed a reason for *you* to stay away from *Paulina*. "

"This Paulina thing really bothers you?" Dan asked.

Danny scowled, pulling his knees to his chest. "You have no idea."

"Why?"

"Besides a vagina, what does she have that I don't?" Danny demanded.

Dan struggled to keep a straight face. "Breasts."

Danny snorted. "Shut up. I mean it, though. You said it yourself; we feel more complete when we're with each other. Paulina can't do that for you."

"You are making this so much weirder than it has to be," Dan muttered.

"And she doesn't know you the way I know you! She didn't get ass handed back to her by you like I did; she didn't see how you came to be; she probably thinks that you're different now that you're in this time line, but I know you're not!"

Dan tilted his head, suddenly serious. "Do you?"

Danny steeled himself. "I do."

Dan sighed. "There's still quite a bit you don't know about me, Danny-boy."

"I know that, too," Danny replied. "So, tell me."

"Tell you?"

Danny nodded. "Tell me everything."

"Like what? I already told you everything important, like what happened when I was made and why I started killing people—"

"No," Danny interrupted. "You told me and my parents what happened when you were made. And that's all you told us—what happened. Tell *me* , Dan, what *made* you."

Dan grimaced. "I don't think that's a good idea..."

"Please, Dan," Danny sighed. "*I know* . I know I wasn't completely... *receptive* to you and what you are, but I want to be. I want to know. Jazz mentioned that just because you're calmer now, it doesn't mean that you stopped being who you were when I met you. And if I want this to move forward, I need to accept that. The only way I can accept that, though, is by knowing. And I'll only know if you tell me."

Dan's face was blank. "So...you want me to tell you about who I am?"

Danny nodded.

"Well, there goes two weeks' of work," Dan muttered sardonically. He breathed out, and "Ezra" melted away; Dan's skin turned blue, his hair was engulfed in flames, and his eyes bled red. His clothes, which had generally been a variation of Ezra's disguise lately, even turned back into his signature uniform.

Danny smiled. "Wow. I haven't seen 'Dan Phantom' in a while."

"You said you wanted me to tell you who I am," Dan replied quietly, "It's probably best I do that as me."

The halfa frowned. "Dan?"

"Danny, have you ever broken any bones?" Dan asked. "I know you didn't before fourteen, but what about after that?"

Danny blinked. "Uh, yeah. I broke my leg. Femur. Clean break, thankfully."

Dan nodded. "Do you remember how much that hurt?"

"Like crazy fucking hell."

"Right. Imagine that pain, *remember* that pain." Dan stood, walking away from Danny. "I don't think you remember, because you technically never lived it, but ripping us apart hurt more than a broken femur. It wasn't like the Fenton Ghost Catcher, where it gently expelled your ghost half. Vlad's ghost gauntlet's are just as sadistic as the man; it felt like every part of me was being ripped apart."

Dan glanced at Danny, then resumed his pacing. "And then, when it was over and the pain subsided, I figured out that *you asked for that* . *You wanted me gone* . I *get* it. It was hard and painful and the worst torture imaginable to know that everyone you ever loved and cared about was gone." Suddenly, the flames on Dan's head intensified and eyes like lasers focused on Danny, burning.

"But what the *fucking hell* did *I* have to do with any of that? How was getting rid of *me* going to change *anything* , Danny?! We were *complete* , Danny! Didn't you *understand* ?! If *anyone else* had stepped into the ghost portal—if anyone else had *tried* —they would have been *dead* ! It was always *supposed* to be you and me and you *abandoned me*, Danny!"

Danny sat, pushed up against the headboard, as Dan yelled at him, his face pale and eyes wide. "I...I don't..."

Dan turned away, irritably twitching. "I *know* , Danny. It wasn't *you* who did that. *You* can't explain it to me and *you* can't answer for the

Danny that did this to me. And even if I still lived in my time line, I wouldn't know because I killed the fucking bastard.

And don't get me wrong, I'm fucking glad I did. When he ripped me out, when he *threw me away*, I knew that I wasn't enough yet to destroy him. I knew I wasn't complete. I knew I wouldn't ever be again, but if I couldn't be whole, at the very least I would be hell on earth. *I* would be the apocalypse and *I* would bring fear and pain and despair because if I had to go through it, the whole damn world would, too. And I knew I wanted to start with the person who discarded me.

I wanted Vlad's ghost half because of Vlad's experience and destructive power; because he was ten times more intelligent than you, but not as creative. Together, I knew I would be everyone's worst nightmare. Besides, why *not* rob the guy who made those damn gauntlets?" Dan grinned, large and sadistic. "And I left him alive. I wanted him to see what I could do and know that he had a hand in my creation—that it was just as much his fault as yours."

Dan sat down in front of Danny, taking in the pale face and cold sweat. "I get off on fear, Danny. I get off on making others do my bidding. I *love* the sound of screams, especially when I'm the reason for them. Being around you keeps me more sane; if I had left your human half alive in my time, I probably wouldn't have gone on a killing spree for so long.

But that doesn't mean I don't enjoy it. I love control; control over whether others live or die is the ultimate high for me. And, if Jazz were here, she might say I enjoy it so much and to such an extreme because my control was taken from me when I was created.

But I just like it, Danny. And I stopped for now, but I don't have many qualms with killing people to get my way. If you keep me on as your partner, and if you ever feel inclined not to immediately erase someone who needs to be erased, I'll probably convince you to let me kill them at birth."

Dan stood again, facing away from Danny as he fiddled with the computer. "And if you ever decide that you want to stop being master of time, I'll ask you to let me kill you. Or, if you decide that you want me gone, I'll force you to kill me. Death is where I feel most comfortable and most complete."

Dan turned swiftly and advanced on Danny, looming over the younger ghost. "Do you get it now, Danny? Do you get *me* now? When you ripped me out, it drove me insane; all I ever wanted was to be complete. *You* rejected *me* ! *You* decided I didn't need to exist anymore and *you* decided to ask the world's craziest motherfucker to take me out in the most painful fucking way possible because I was just a fucking *thing* to you! I *was* you, Danny! Until you threw me out, I was just as much Danny fucking Fenton as your human half! *And you tried to kill me* !

Fucking hell, Danny, what did I ever do to deserve that?"

Danny swallowed loudly. "I don't know. I'm so sorry, Dan. Because... because it sounds like you didn't do anything wrong."

Dan breathed heavily, nose inches from Danny's. "I know I didn't."

Danny put a hand on Dan's shoulder. "For what it's worth, I—as in, the Danny that I am now and here, in this time—would never have done that to you."

"It physically aches not to kill people," Dan whispered.

Danny's lips quirked in a smile. "Then I better hope no one pisses you off enough."

Dan blinked. "That's it? That's all you have to say to that?"

"Well, that and they'll probably think they're going to hell when you kill them, cause you kind of look like Hades with that hair of yours," Danny replied, straight-faced.

Dan stared at Danny, eyes wide. Slowly, a smile formed on his face. "You're fucking insane. And a terrible comedian."

"At least I have company in the asylum," Danny replied. "And I bet our friends there will think I'm *hilarious*."

Dan straightened, eyes focused on the look of disappointment that flitted Danny's face. He flopped on the bed beside Danny and stared at the ceiling, conscious of Danny's eyes roaming his face. With a sigh, Dan closed his eyes and concentrated.

Flaming hair relaxed and fell across his forehead, short bangs brushing along his eyebrows; his white hair was similar to Danny's, but shorter.

"Holy shit," Danny said. "Is that your *hair*?"

Dan rolled his eyes. "Yes. Happy now?"

"Why do you make the bangs longer when you're Ezra?"

Dan smirked. "I like variety."

Danny ran his hands through Dan's hair. Unlike Dan's cold skin, the hair was heated, but not burning. The strands parted like hair, but felt almost like silk. Danny, entranced, kept petting Dan's hair. Dan, eventually, relaxed and closed his eyes again.

"Danny?" Dan said quietly. "I'm...not *not* happy that I failed to kill you."

Danny's brows furrowed. "What?"

"Double negatives cancel each other out; solve it yourself, kid."

Danny blinked and whispered the words to himself. A large smile broke out on his face.

"Satisfied, Danny?" Dan asked.

"Thank you," Danny said in reply. "That means a lot to me."

"Yeah, kay thanks." Dan replied flippantly. Danny merely smiled more.

They sat in silence for a bit longer, Danny carefully running his fingers through Dan's hair.

"So...about the Paulina thing..."

Dan opened one eyes. "What *about* the Paulina thing?"

"Have you, I don't know, decided *not* to pursue her?"

Dan sat up, dislodging Danny's hand. "Why would I decide that?"

Danny frowned. "Well, I mean...you just opened up to *me* . You admitted that you and I are, if you'll excuse the phrase, *made* for each other. I'm not saying we rip off our clothes right now and get at it, but I thought we were going to at least...commit, I guess?"

Dan glared at him. "Well, Danny, *you* still don't know what you want and I feel like it's *my* decision whether I decide to 'pursue' something with Paulina or not."

"Why do you need to decide anything?" Danny scowled. "There's nothing *to* decide."

Dan bared his teeth. "Again: that's *my* decision to make, Danny-boy. I'm pretty sure I just spent the last half hour explaining to you why you taking away my ability to choose pissed me the fuck off, so what the hell?"

"I just don't want you to feed me some bullshit and then run off with Paulina!"

Dan rolled his eyes. "Goddamn it, Danny, does Paulina *seem* like the kind of girl who'd be okay with that?"

"She *seems* like you she likes you enough, so how should I know?" Danny retorted.

Dan groaned. "Even if she was that kind of girl—and she *isn't* , you asshole—what does it matter if *I'm* the one making the decision?"

"Fine. Okay. Then decide: me or Paulina?" Danny said, crossing his arms.

Dan frowned. "What? No! I don't have to decide shit right now! Besides, if anyone should be making decisions, it should be *you* . You keep saying you want to keep me around and we're going to be partners, but I notice you conveniently forgot to tell me what *exactly* you want me to be."

Danny turned away. "I-I haven't exactly...figured it out..."

"And yet, you want *me* to commit to whatever the hell this is so that, whenever *you're* ready, I can be there—waiting. Like a *fucking dog* ."

"No! I just—"

"Fucking shit, Danny, I'm not your pet!"

"I know you're not!"

"Then what the hell, Danny? What the *actual* hell?"

"You're *mine* , Dan! Get it now? So what if I haven't' decided what I want from you yet? I'm fucking seventeen! I can't have everything figured out! It just feels like Paulina is a threat and I don't want to lose you before I know what I want with you!"

Dan grit his teeth. "I'm not a fucking toy, Daniel. You cannot put me on a shelf and decide when you want to play with me. You have to deal with the consequences of your choices, because whatever number you spit out on me, it doesn't fucking matter. The consequences of your decisions don't care about how old you are or how long it takes you to take your head out of your ass."

"Dammit, Dan! I *like* you! Isn't that enough?"

Dan shook his head. "No, Danny. It *isn't* . Not if you can't see that you *liking* me doesn't mean you getting to take my decisions from me."

Danny's eyes widened, a pained expression on his face. Then, his eyes narrowed and his lips formed a snarl. "You know what? You know what I think? I think this is just part of your stupid plan to use my jealousy to make me more dependent on you."

"For fuck's sake, Danny—"

"No, that's exactly what this is! Because, otherwise, why would you throw away what's basically me *agreeing* to whatever the hell this is? Or maybe you think it's not cheating if you hook up with Paulina *now* when you haven't committed to anything?"

"That isn't it, you motherfucking brat! If you would just listen—"

"Maybe the other Danny was right to get rid of you."

Dan started, staring at Danny with wide eyes. Danny glared mutinously at the floor, but as the silence stretched on, the anger drained from his face. Gradually, Danny's brows relaxed and his mouth slackened. Wide, worried blue eyes snapped to Dan. Mute, Danny shook his head slowly. He reached for Dan, but the older ghost quickly took a step back.

"Wait, Dan, I didn't mean—" Danny tried, reaching again.

"Do. Not." Dan growled. White rings emerged around his waist, flying in opposite directions, and Ezra stood in Dan's place.

Danny continued shaking his head. "No, Dan, wait, let me explain —!"

"Go to hell, Danny," Dan muttered, teeth clenched. He pushed passed Danny, too angry to remember phasing through the floor, and

stomped down the stairs. Jazz stood at the landing, biting her nails, and looked up as Dan approached.

"Dan?" she asked and followed him quickly as he walked to the front door. "Dan, what's wrong? I heard yelling!"

"Ask your brother," Dan growled.

Junior and Minnie watched from the couch as Jazz grabbed Dan's arm. His hands clenched into fists and Dan turned around. " *What, Jazz?*"

Jazz bit her lip. "Are you okay?"

Dan sighed, some of the tension easing from his shoulders. He relaxed his hands and shook his head. "No, Jazz. I'm not."

"What happened, Dan?"

"I don't really want to talk to you about it right now," Dan said. "Besides, Danny probably needs you."

Jazz looked up at the ceiling then back at Dan. "But..."

"Allow Phantom his respite, dear sister," Minnie said quietly. "Careful I speak, for words are true weapons. It appears to me he has wounds to heal."

The redheaded girl frowned. "Danny said something, didn't he?"

Dan looked away. "Yes, he did, Jazz. He said something and now I need to get out of this house before I destroy it again. Now will you leave me alone?"

Jazz nodded. "Of course. Just remember: Danny's a teenager. I know that doesn't excuse whatever he said, but he's really still a kid. In a sense, so are you. And that's okay. Kids hurt people sometimes, without realizing it. Sometimes they hurt people on purpose, when they've been hurt first.

He'll still need to apologize and he'll need to make up for it, but try not to take it too much to heart, Dan. Please."

Dan nodded silently. Jazz hugged him, unsurprised when he didn't reciprocate. As she released him, she smiled at him. Dan nodded again and walked out of the house. Jazz turned to the children on the couch.

"We'll stay here, Jazz," Junior said before she could ask. "You take care of Danny."

Smiling gratefully at them, she ran up the stairs and into Danny's room. Danny stood near his bed, facing the wall. As Jazz approached, Danny crumpled to his knees.

"Danny!" Jazz cried, rushing over. She grasped his shoulders and sat in front of him. Danny, though, stared at his hands and remained unresponsive. "Danny, please! Tell me what happened!"

"Jazz," Danny whispered. "He's gone."

"What?"

"Dan's gone," Danny whispered, shaking his head again. "I said something *awful* to him, and now he probably hates me. The only reason he didn't kill me is probably because of that stupid collar."

"What did you say, Danny?" Jazz implored.

"He's never going to come back," Danny continued, hyperventilating. "He's never going to want to see my face again and it's all my fault. How could I be so *stupid*?"

"Danny!" Jazz said, slapping him soundly across the face. "Stop that! Tell me what happened."

Watery blue eyes looked up at the redhead. "I told him that the other Danny—the me from his time line—was right to get rid of him."

Jazz inhaled deeply. "Oh, Danny, you *didn't* ."

"I was just so angry, Jazz! He didn't want to give up Paulina! He kept saying it was his decision—"

"But it *is* his decision, Danny," Jazz said. "Why would you try to force him to choose?"

Danny's eyes suddenly hardened. "You're taking *his* side? I thought you were *my* sister!"

Jazz glared at him and stood up. "Don't you dare talk to me like that, Daniel Fenton. I've been by your side since day one; I may not have always gone about it the best way, but I always wanted to make sure you had the best of everything because I knew our parents were too neglectful of you. So don't you *dare* speak to me like that, Danny. I've done too much for you to have you accuse me of taking anyone else's side but yours!"

Danny looked up at Jazz, the anger having gone. Wide eyed and breath hitching, Danny nodded. "I-I'm sorry, Jazz. You're right."

Slowly, Jazz sat next to him again, her expression softening. "Danny, *what* is going on? I thought you were better after you read the journal?"

Danny laid his head on her shoulder and shook his head. Jazz wrapped her arms around her brother, one hand carding through his hair gently. When her shoulder started to moisten, Jazz clutched Danny closer. "Oh, Danny."

"I got scared, Jazz," Danny said, muffled and sniffling. "I laid my cards out on the table and I was scared I was going to get nothing from it. I got scared of what we would have to tell everyone and what mom and dad would think and what Sam, Dash, and Kwan would think and I just...if he was a guarantee, if he had promised to pick me over Paulina, I thought maybe I could deal with everything that came with it."

Jazz patted his head. "But Danny, you're asking him to guarantee himself without telling him that *you're* a guarantee, too. You're expecting him to put himself completely out there and to get nothing from you."

"I didn't know how much I was willing to give."

"Then maybe that should be enough for now, Danny," Jazz replied. "There is no reason to rush this. I have a feeling that things will work out. But you can't force him to choose you. Remember, Danny? You can't manipulate the manipulator. All you can do is be honest with him."

Danny sighed, pulling away from Jazz and quickly wiping his eyes. "Yeah, you're right. As usual."

"It isn't about me being right, Danny—"

"No, that's a good thing, Jazz." Danny smiled at her, albeit not as brightly. "That means you'll always be able to set me straight when I mess up like this."

Jazz smiled back softly. "Always, little brother."

Danny sighed again, looking away. "I want to chase him down...but I bet he needs his space."

"That's probably a good idea."

They sat together in silence, Jazz's hand covering Danny's. Danny sat up a bit and turned to her. "Does he like any food in particular?"

Jazz grinned. "You gonna apologize with a dinner?"

"The way to a man's heart is through his stomach," Danny chuckled. "If nothing else, I figure he'll at least stop complaining about mom's cooking."

Jazz laughed, standing and pulling Danny up with her. "C'mon. I don't know what he likes, but I feel like every stereotypical sociopathic murderer loves steak."

"You're the best, Jazz."

"I know."

Paulina sighed, pushing her pencil around her desk as Lancer taught them. Vaguely, she wondered if there were any other teachers in the school, but decided that she was probably just distracting herself.

Teal eyes glanced up at Tucker, who sat near the front behind Danny's empty seat. Paulina hadn't intended on revealing quite so much to Tucker, but the need to *talk to anyone* was so overwhelming. Paulina only had so many options, she couldn't help but open up to the tech genius. She could talk to Danny, but despite her belief that she would ultimately concede Ezra to Danny, she didn't want to make it any easier on the ghost boy. Danny needed to learn Ezra's value, and if that meant a little competition, Paulina didn't mind. She *was* experienced in being the competition, after all. She also couldn't talk to her best friend, Star, because Paulina knew that Star might not be as open regarding Ezra's intentions and it wasn't Paulina's secret to reveal, anyway.

Paulina looked around and the fiery shock of red hair one classmate had caught her eye. She supposed, in hindsight, she could talk to Jazz; she did recall Danny mentioning that his whole family was aware of Ezra's real identity, and if anyone could figure out what was going on between Danny and Ezra, it would likely be Jazz. Besides, Paulina hadn't forgotten that apparently there were others that Clockwork had to convince on Ezra's behalf, as Ezra himself had alluded to. It wasn't a far leap to assume that person would definitely be Jazz, who was always Danny's staunchest supporter.

But, in a way, Paulina was glad that Tucker was the person she ended up talking to. Paulina was smart enough to recognize the

similarities between herself and Tucker: they were both geniuses in their own right; they were both one of the few minorities in the mostly-white Amityville; and they both had wronged Danny in some way and were seeking ways to make amends, albeit without Danny's knowledge.

Paulina wasn't blind to the way Tucker defended Danny without question after the incident with the Disasteroid. She wasn't sure, but she could vaguely remember an incident where she served as a slave for Tucker, as if he was a pharaoh. She definitely remembered overhearing Tucker apologize for trying to hurt Danny after that. And she definitely remembered when Tucker briefly had ghost powers; it was around the same time she mysteriously became the cutest thing in existence. She knew Tucker's defense of Danny was his form of retribution because, like any best friend, Tucker was probably jealous of Danny's powers and popularity at one time.

And Tucker, unlike Star and Sam, wouldn't— *didn't* —judge Danny or Ezra when he found out where their relationship was heading. That was one thing Paulina hadn't expected of Tucker, who tended to cling to labels as though he couldn't exist without them.

Perhaps, Paulina thought, there was even a chance of her and Tucker becoming friends.

The bell rang, forcing the Latina from her musings. With a heavy sigh, she collected her items slowly and rose. As she expected, Sam and Kwan barricaded themselves around her desk. Tucker, who was nearly out of the room, glanced back and shook his head. Resolutely, he walked over.

"You guys," he said once he was near enough, "Can we just drop this? No matter what you guys think, this isn't the place to have this conversation."

"We have a right to know, Tucker," Sam argued.

"Actually," Paulina interjected, "you don't. What I know and whoever told me is *my* business. If whomever told me decides they want you to know what I know, then I will gladly tell you. Until then, leave me alone." She pushed passed Kwan—he always was a bit of a teddy bear, despite being a linebacker—and headed towards the classroom door. Sam quickly grabbed Paulina's wrist, forcing the Latina to turn back around.

"Listen, Paulina," Sam hissed. "I don't care what your entitled ass thinks—"

"I hope you care what my entitled ass thinks," a voice said. The teens gathered around Paulina turned, surprised to see "Ezra" leaning against the doorway. "Because I agree with her."

Sam pursed her lips. "Dan. I thought you and Danny were taking the day off."

"We were," Dan confirmed. "I decided I needed some space and wanted to hang with Paulina. I couldn't find her outside, her dad hadn't seen her yet, so I came to look for her."

Paulina shot him a grateful look and wrenched her wrist out of Sam's hold. She flipped her hair and walked towards Dan, nodding at Tucker as she passed. Tucker nodded back to her. Sam, however, sighed explosively.

"I don't get this! What the hell do you see in her, Dan? In what way does Paulina contribute to your plans? I know what you're planning with Danny—don't try to put me off, because Danny himself basically confirmed it! What is going on?"

Dan groaned. "You just do not stop."

Sam scowled. "Where has being silent ever helped a woman?"

"Touché," Dan smirked, but sobered quickly. "Seriously, though, Sam. You can't listen if you don't shut up. Whatever you think is

going on—if you think I'm trying to manipulate Danny or something—you're wrong. Danny knows everything I'm doing. Paulina is my friend. That's it."

"That can't be it!" Sam shouted. "Danny *cannot* be okay with what you're doing!"

"Goddamn it, Sam!" Paulina shouted, stomping her foot. Everyone jumped, surprised. "You paranoid bitch, do you even *listen* to *yourself* ? Get—it—through—your—head! You don't know everything! You don't know what Danny and Dan do when they're alone; you don't know what Dan and I talk about; you don't know who knows and who doesn't! What will it take for you to understand? *You don't know everything* ! You keep making all these assumptions without knowing anything and you keep hurting everyone involved because you're so damn sure you're right!

Well, you're not! All you're going to end up doing is alienating everyone you care about because who the hell wants to be around someone who can't accept people for who they fucking are?" Paulina shook her head, panting. "For once, Sam, why don't you ask Danny to sit down with you, and with everyone, and figure out what's going on? You need to learn how to *listen* , Sam, before you drive away *all* your friends." Paulina glared at a stricken Sam. "Like you did before."

With that, she grabbed Dan's wrist and dragged the ghost out of the classroom. The others stood in the empty classroom, silent. Finally, Sam sat down, shaking her head.

"Is she right about me again?" she asked quietly.

Tucker shrugged. "You can't change in one day, Sam," he said reasonably. "It will take time. But she is right, you know; you need to stop assuming things and thinking you have all the facts. That may have worked when we were ghost hunting, but that's because you were well-researched. People don't work the same way as books, Sam."

Kwan, visibly confused, patted Sam's shoulder. "Maybe we should listen to Paulina, Sam. We should talk to Danny and see if he's willing to be completely honest with us."

Sighing deeply, Sam nodded. "Yeah." With another nod, she took out her phone and texted Danny.

Instead of dragging them to Paulina's dad's car, the Latina led Dan to the back of the school again. She leaned against the wall, breathing heavily, while Dan stared at her. After another beat of silence, Paulina huffed and turned to look at him. Her eyes were hard, icy. "How *dare* she? I'm so tired of her always judging people, like she's *so much* better! What right does she have to judge what you and Danny are doing?"

Dan's eyebrows drew together. "In her, admittedly meagre, defense, she doesn't know me. She only knows what she knows and what she sees and she's kind of right to be worried, going by her limited information."

"That's her problem," Paulina snarled. "She always has limited information, but she's so willing to make snap judgements based on them. What does she know about you? That you were evil, that you came back, that you're obviously working towards being a better person, that you're friends with me and Danny, and that you and Danny are really close. That's it! What can you infer from *that* ? Nothing!

God, she *always* does that! Did you know she and I used to be friends in grade school?" Paulina asked, her hair whipping around erratically as she paced back and forth. Dan merely watched her, mute. "We *were* friends, but then I started to like skirts and blouses and boys and none of the stuff *she* liked, so she decided I was *fake* and stopped being my friend. Fine, whatever. I don't care. But you don't get to judge other people when they don't fit into your world the way you want them to!

So I decided I wanted to be part of the popular kids. Why does she get to judge me and call me shallow? What does she know about me anymore? She doesn't know that my mom's gone! She doesn't know that my dad is always working! She doesn't know that I'm awesome at math! She doesn't know that I felt alone and I wanted to stop feeling that way! Did she think it didn't hurt when she *ditched me* because I wasn't 'the old Paulina'?" The Latina girl faced Dan, huffing. "Do you know what she told me when she decided we weren't gonna be friends anymore?"

'I just think you should know: you're kind of a poser. You're not the old Paulina and I don't want to hang out with someone so fake.' Who the hell says that? She only cares about people if they're *weird* like her, but she's not weird! She's not any more unique than me or you, Ezra! She *wants* to be weird and unique because her family seems so perfect and so *suburban*, and she can't stand not having something about her that makes her special. Know what *I* know? I know her parents love her and support her, no matter how *goth* she gets; I know her parents pay for her and pamper her; *I know she has both her parents* ! So, what? She's into the *occult* ? Like other people aren't? She likes to wear dark clothes and doesn't want to be the plastic model girl the world tries to make us? *There isn't a single girl in the world who wants to be that* ! We just want to be accepted; who is she to judge how we try to get that acceptance? Right!?"

Dan drew in a long breath, exhaling carefully as he watched Paulina resume her pacing. After a moment of letting her mutter to herself, Dan grabbed her shoulder. Nostrils flared, Paulina stopped her frantic steps and turned to him.

"Paulina," Dan said, hesitant, "I don't really know what to say or do to make you feel any better. I know I'm technically an adult, but I sort of killed anyone if they pissed me off, so I never really had to communicate. Still, I feel like this is something that you need to tell Sam. Maybe she doesn't know what she did. She is a little controlling and a little self-absorbed. She's a *kid* . You're all kids,

honestly. And that's okay. Kids hurt people sometimes, without realizing it." Dan shook his head, sighing heavily.

"Sometimes they hurt people on purpose, when they've been hurt first."

Paulina sucked in a breath through clenched teeth and looked away. Dan gripped her shoulder gently, waiting for her to look back at him.

"It's okay, Paulina. *You're* okay. Sam ditching you doesn't mean you're any less interesting or not a good friend." Dan shrugged. "For what it's worth, you're my *best* friend."

Paulina shuddered, her eyes shut tightly. She gripped at her chest, but Dan's hand on her shoulder was a solid weight that kept her grounded. She didn't expect it to hurt so much when he finally used the "f" word, and she didn't expect it to be so soon, but she supposed it was better than letting her fall deeper. She glanced at Dan; his shoulders were tense, his eyes a little less lively. He *had* mentioned that he needed space after talking to Danny, but he sought out Paulina's company instead of being alone. He sought out her company, but was careful to define them as *friends*, she realized. Dan didn't abandon Danny, or seek her out to replace him. Dan needed a friend. She smiled.

She could be that friend.

Dan let his hand fall from her shoulder and stepped back as she turned around. Paulina nodded and held her arms up. Dan stared at her, unmoving. After a few moments, Paulina huffed and shook her arms, still holding them up. Dan shrugged, his arms still to his side.

"Hug me, *estupido* ," she finally said.

Dan hesitated, but acquiesced with a roll of his eyes, allowing his arms to close around her shoulders as she stepped into his space, her own arms wrapping around his waist.

"Seriously, Danny's gonna think I'm straight at this rate," Dan griped.

Paulina laughed. "Idiot. Of course he won't."

Dan sighed, burying his nose in her hair. It was silky and soft and smelled of coconut. Her shoulders were insignificant under his large hands and he felt like he could protect her. Svelte and petite, Paulina's body felt nice against his own.

But it was still wrong.

Her hair was too long, too silky. There were no spikes, no flyaways, no coarseness from hours spent flying; Dan knew she didn't need him to protect her, but her shoulders sloped too elegantly—they weren't the rigid line of a soldier's; her body nearly fit against his, but it wasn't a perfect fit, a completion that he craved. Even as Dan held her tightly against him, his hands didn't wander, didn't want to explore. He sighed again, acceptance sagging his shoulders.

Maybe in another universe, another world, another time, Dan thought, *but...*

"Of course he won't," Paulina repeated. "I'll set him straight if he does...in a manner of speaking."

Dan huffed a little laugh. "You're right. Thanks."

"What for?"

Dan shrugged. "I don't know. I just felt like I should say something nice."

The hands clutching at his shirt loosened and patted Dan's back. Heaving a cleansing breath, Paulina nodded again, patting Dan's back more confidently. "All right, Ezra. Tell me what Danny did. Let's get you your *damoiseau* in distress."

"Cute, Paulina."

"I try."

Clockwork sat at the table, hands wrapped around the cup of tea he wasn't going to drink. Privately, he wondered if she gave him the tea just to mock him.

"You want me to... *what*?" her musical voice said; she puttered around in her kitchen, making another cup of tea that she would definitely drink right in his face.

"I want you to meet and train the incoming master of time," Clockwork repeated.

"Why do I have to train him?"

Clockwork rolled his eyes. "You'll be working with him, *obviously*."

"What's in it for me?"

Clockwork groaned. "What do you want, Ishtar?"

Ishtar turned around and smiled at him. Her long, black, wavy hair cascaded down her back and over dark chocolate shoulders. Her golden eyes sparkled with mischief. She placed a hand on her hip, and Clockwork couldn't help his eyes tracing her figure—from the top of her busty chest, to her size twelve waist, and to her wide hips. Scowling at himself, Clockwork looked away and feigned drinking his tea. The wide smirk on Ishtar's face proved it was as futile an action as Clockwork thought.

"Oh love," she said as she approached, wrapping her arms around Clockwork's shoulder. "You know *exactly* what I want."

Clockwork scoffed. "Maybe if you didn't kill all your lovers."

"They probably shouldn't have referred to porn to learn how to please women. I'm sure you're smarter than that."

"I won't take my chances with you. Anything *else* I can do for you to agree to this?"

Ishtar trilled a laugh. "You'll fall in my bed, eventually. They all do."

"Not Gilgamesh," Clockwork retorted.

Ishtar shrugged, flipping her hair. "Saw him with his wife once. Small dick, rotten lay. Would've been a waste anyway. That being said, since you won't keep me company in my bed, I demand an escort into the human realm. I hear there are new magazines and I wish to purchase and read them."

Clockwork shook his head. "You have *got* to stop reading Cosmopolitan."

"Do you agree to my terms?"

Clockwork rolled his eyes again. "Yes, my queen. You will have an escort and you will have your magazines. Are you pleased?"

Ishtar smiled, cocking her hip again with her arms akimbo; her smile widened as she noticed that even the unflappable Clockwork couldn't resist admiring her body again. "Yes, Clockwork. Ishtar, the goddess of life, is quite pleased."

"Great. Please put on some clothes."

And so time marches on...

I hope you like it! I wrote this in pieces, constantly flitting between scenes until they were all complete. The hardest part was making the emotions believable; the second time I wrote this (after it got deleted), all the emotions felt too artificial and I did not like it at all. I hope this was better.